EDGE




console
XBOX 360

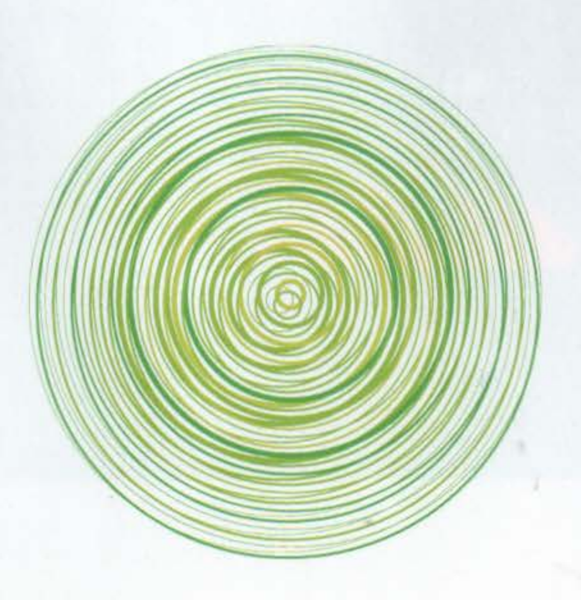


There's a fair test we can apply when we want to gauge the feeling that surrounds new technology, and it's a simple one: get it up and running and see who it manages to draw, Pied Piper-like, from their desks. As you may know, the company that publishes **Edge** also produces dozens of other magazines, and this month staffers from music, car, photography, technology, PC and other videogame publications have all been drawn to our office by the arrival of Microsoft's Xbox 360. Videogaming's next generation clearly has something of an audience.

It wasn't like this when Sony's PlayStation arrived, nor Sega's Saturn. In the early '90s you could've mentioned that Panasonic's REAL 3DO Player had arrived on test and it wouldn't have registered more than a flicker of interest on the faces of non-videogame journos. In fact the only console to have generated the type of interest conjured up by Xbox 360's arrival was the Nintendo 64. (Not every new console brings to the table something as immediately, intoxicatingly revolutionary as *Super Mario 64*, of course.)

What's clear from the attendant interest in Xbox 360's entrance is simply that, nowadays, more people are into videogames than ever before. And that's why the console exists: to give Microsoft the opportunity to expertly snaffle up the biggest possible slice of the cash that's sloshing around what has become one of the biggest entertainment industries in existence. As J Allard tells us (see p8), he wants an Xbox 360 alongside every TV in the world.

Does your TV need one? That's a question answered by this month's hands-on test of the hardware (p78) and Review section (p87). Suffice it to say that there's no equivalent of *Super Mario 64* within these pages, but there are reasons enough to make the likes of Nintendo begin to take Microsoft seriously as not only a player in the console gaming world, but a bona fide pioneer.



EDGE

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"If you shoot me you're liable to lose a lot of those humanitarian awards"







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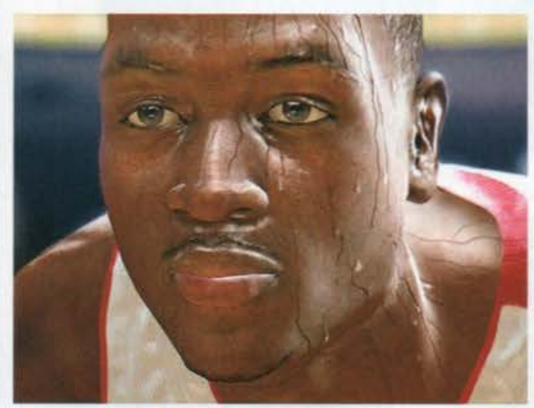
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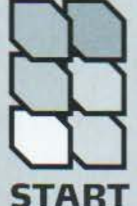
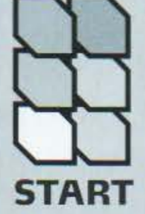


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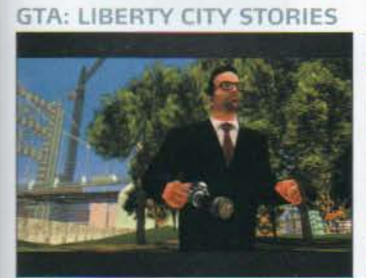
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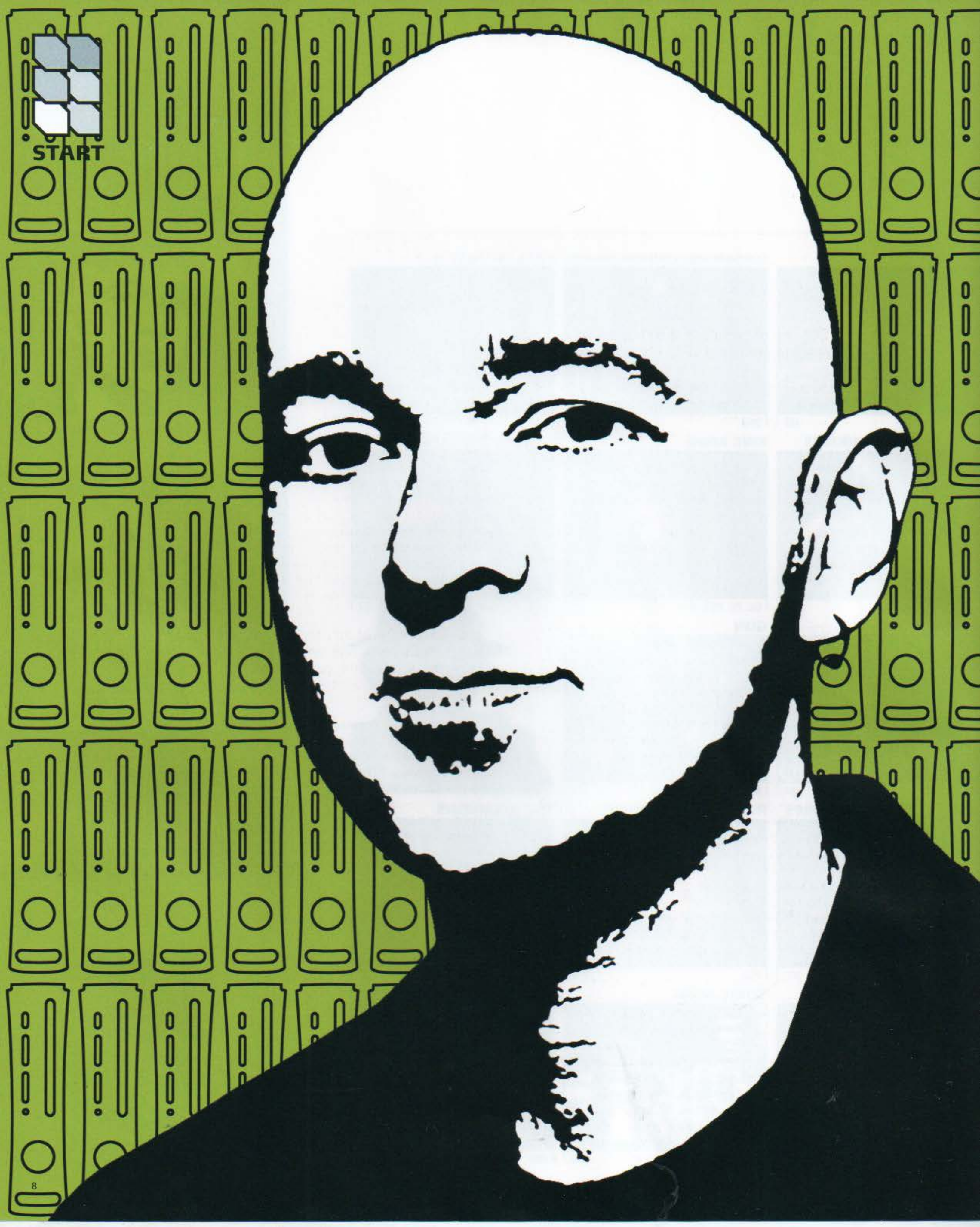


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INTERVIEW

"We have the best launch line-up of any console ever"

Xbox 360's chief architect is in bullish mood now that his far-reaching console vision has turned into reality

Sitting down with Xbox's **J Allard** six months ago, at the 360's unveiling, two things became very quickly apparent. The first was that this was a machine built around a philosophy, not a set of tech specs. The jargon of an 'interactive entertainment experience powered by human energy' and the 'iconic gesture of a martial artist drawing in breath' has been lampooned enthusiastically enough, but the idea of tailoring the machine to fit the user's needs, rather than just maximising the possible processing power, has produced a very distinct console. The second was that, despite leading a project whose stated goal was to produce a machine that would appeal to as wide a demographic as possible, it was clear Allard had built a machine around a very personal vision. So, as it readies for launch, we spoke to him again to see how well it lived up to his expectations and to hear where he thinks it leaves his competitors.

Now that the machine is in production and on your desk, how well does it fulfil your original vision?

I think it's pretty much spot on. I spoke with someone who was very involved in the planning about three years ago – he came over for about five minutes to drop something off and ended up spending three hours looking at all the capabilities of the machine, and he said, "Son of a gun, if you guys didn't do 95 per cent of the original vision of the machine!" And I looked at him and said, "Well, what was the other five per cent, what did we drop?" and he said, "I don't know. I couldn't find it!"

With the first Xbox, you were launching into a very sceptical climate. How different was it this time round?

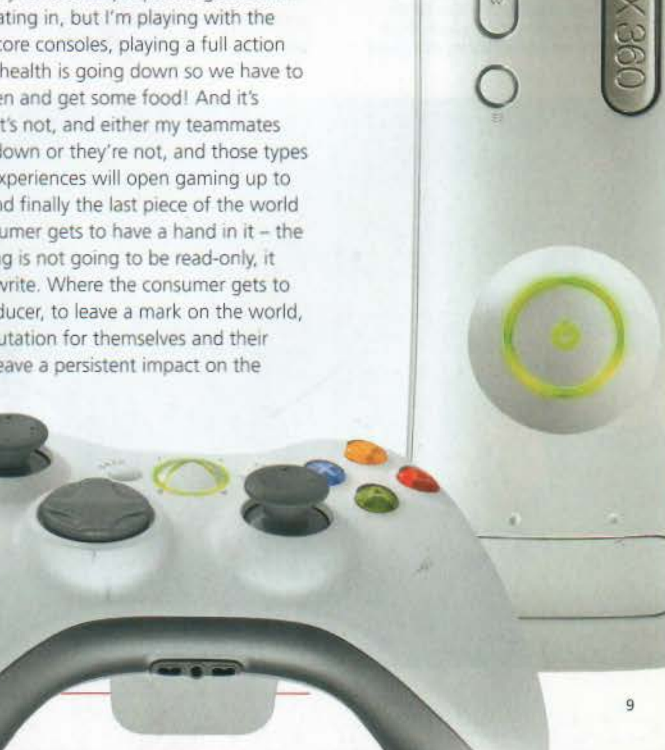
Well it's interesting, there are pros and cons. The tricky thing is, once you have a reputation it's a little bit more challenging to grow that reputation. Our reputation is very strong with hardcore games, so expanding the brand to mean more than the hardcore gamer's machine – that's a challenge. And we've talked about it an awful lot for the last year or year and a half, but you're not going to change your reputation by talking about changing your reputation. You change it through your actions, and our actions are really going to start to prove out with the first product, the first set of the games, the first set of online experiences. And I think people will experience a broader and more welcoming kind of product. And they can look at it and squint five years down the line and say, "Yeah, I see how this will become more mainstream without alienating the hardcore."

So what will the 360 be delivering five years down the line?

I would actually think a little beyond 360. I am a huge believer in the notion of persistent worlds and environments that you can portal into from multiple viewpoints. So I think the hallmark of a fantastic gaming experience three to five years from now is going to be a great universe with amazing characters and plotlines and conflict and whatnot. But it's a world – a living world – that I can participate in whether I'm on my cellphone, a handheld gaming unit, a PC or a console. And I think in that vein the 360 brings some unique attributes to the table, particularly the investments that we've made online. I think we've done all the right things to be the preferred way to access that kind of entertainment. But not the only way – I think what's crucial is the notion of being able to create a central universe that you 'project out' instead of 'insert in' to the drive – online environment that could be projected out to any smart devices which have screens and buttons. I think that's going to open up gaming to a lot of people, to a lot of casual players. It's a silly notion, but say someone who's into really simple puzzle

"I think the hallmark of a fantastic game in three to five years' time is going to be a world you can access from a handheld, a PC or a console"

games could be playing that kind of game, but by doing that, you know, making food for the troops in *Halo*. And they have a simple puzzle game that they're participating in, but I'm playing with the troops on hardcore consoles, playing a full action game, and our health is going down so we have to go to the kitchen and get some food! And it's either there or it's not, and either my teammates are letting me down or they're not, and those types of interaction experiences will open gaming up to new people. And finally the last piece of the world is that the consumer gets to have a hand in it – the future of gaming is not going to be read-only, it becomes read-write. Where the consumer gets to play a little producer, to leave a mark on the world, and build a reputation for themselves and their character and leave a persistent impact on the











It's still a little unclear exactly which games will arrive when in the 360's unusually generous launch window, but 360-exclusive titles to expect between now and Christmas include *Perfect Dark Zero, Dead Or Alive 4, Project Gotham Racing 3, Amped 3, Condemned: Criminal Origins, Ridge Racer 6* and *Kameo*

gaming world. Make it a little bit more like reality. So far, for the last 15 years since the advent of 3D gaming, we've been very fixated about what the pixels look like on screen. But that's just one attribute of reality, a lot of these games are still very linear, very predictable and quite frankly boring – they're very fancy versions of *Pac-Man*, you just kinda go through the motions, as opposed to the unpredictability of human behaviour, both the positive and the negative.

Those sound like the kinds of worlds you want a built-in hard drive for, though.
[Laughs] Not necessarily. Bandwidth is increasing just about everywhere, there's no reason to say you couldn't have a *Halo*-style experience on a 360 without a hard drive, where the state of the world is just streaming to you through your network connection.

Can you tell yet from preorders what the split is going to be between those with hard drives and those without for 360?
The safe thing to say is that it's definitely going to be predominantly hard drive – that's going to be the majority. But you've got to think about where we are in time and space. By 2008 it might be different, and it might be different for a couple of reasons. One because you're hitting a more cost-conscious consumer and less hardcore consumer, and two, broadband's going to be at another place in 2008. I think it took me 37 seconds to download *Geometry Wars 2* on Live Arcade last night so now when I want to play it, it's nice that I've cut 35 seconds out of it and it's only taking me two seconds to stream it off the hard drive. But 37 seconds ain't that bad! When we were waiting in line in the arcade and putting quarters in the machine and pressing Start and listening to the intro music – that was very close to 35 seconds. So if my broadband speed doubles over the next couple of years maybe I'll be at the point where I don't think I'll need a hard drive for Live Arcade, I'll just tune in. I'll treat it like TV.

After the challenges of the worldwide hardware launch, and the worry about stock shortages, do you still intend to continue that pattern for future 360 games, peripherals and services?
Absolutely. It's the right thing to do for gamers and it's the right thing to do for the industry. Publishers and developers are investing too much money and too much effort for them not to be able to target this worldwide market and get the most out of the energy they put in. And gamers deserve the respect of worldwide launches. It's what gamers want – no one likes to be treated as a second-class citizen. And while we couldn't do the exact same day in all the territories, we're doing pretty darn good. And we'll catch some flack in terms of allocations and stock shortages, but sometimes doing the right thing means doing the hard thing. And I'd rather get some negative PR



around the fact that we're sold out in some regions and maybe we should have waited, than having gamers call me up saying: "What they heck are you guys thinking, shipping this a year later? Why are you disrespecting me?" And having publishers call up and say: "I just sunk $15 million into this product and you're telling me I can't sell it into 16 countries in Europe?" Those are the calls I don't want to take. We'll get a little bit of heat but it was the right decision.

What was the first piece of 360 game software that you played that made you say: "Yes, that's it, that's what we were trying to accomplish"?
Uh – well, in a way it hasn't happened yet, I would say. Then again, I am not a history buff by any stretch of the imagination, and I'm not a big fan of firstperson shooters, they're not my personal preference,



***Call Of Duty 2* is Allard's favourite 360 game so far, and his appreciation of the smoke effects is easy to understand, especially when fighting through the clouds of choking chaos a well-placed grenade can produce during multiplayer**



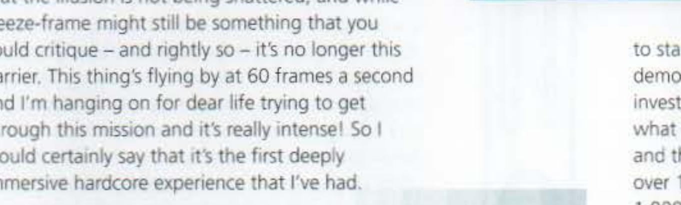


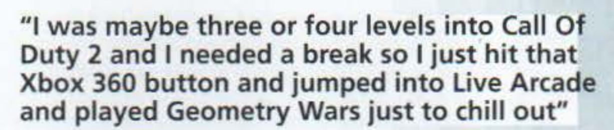




but *Call Of Duty 2* [see review on p96] is *amazing*. It's an incredibly immersive experience, and actually evoked emotion from me at a level that hadn't been done before. The combination of the graphical fidelity and the immersion and the audio work they've done is phenomenal, and what they've been able to do with things like the smoke – now you throw a smoke grenade through a second-floor window and the smoke settles from the second floor to the first floor and you come in and a bad guy jumps out from underneath the stairs and breaks through the smoke and you literally almost drop the controller. I mean it's scary stuff! It's what *Resident Evil* did in cutscenes to wig you out before, but now it's happening for real and you really feel in the thick of it.

Now, on one hand, you could pause that game at any point in time and critique the visual effects and look at textures and what they've done with geometry, and you could see something here or there – and people could be very critical of it in terms of the visual look. But what happens with a game that's designed so well is that you become so immersed in it that you're focused on the dead centre of the screen and the things that are happening around you. We've now reached a point that the graphical fidelity is really good enough that the illusion is not being shattered, and while freeze-frame might still be something that you could critique – and rightly so – it's no longer this barrier. This thing's flying by at 60 frames a second and I'm hanging on for dear life trying to get through this mission and it's really intense! So I would certainly say that it's the first deeply immersive hardcore experience that I've had.





"I was maybe three or four levels into Call Of Duty 2 and I needed a break so I just hit that Xbox 360 button and jumped into Live Arcade and played Geometry Wars just to chill out"

On the flipside, there are some other experiences that really delighted me when I was playing *Call Of Duty* – I was maybe three or four levels in and I was just kind of cooked, the intensity was just a little high. I needed a break, so I just hit that Xbox 360 button [laughs] and went to the dashboard and jumped into Live Arcade and I played *Geometry Wars* for half an hour, I just chilled out – put Underworld on the soundtrack and just played till I got on the top ten on the leaderboard. And then I think the third thing that happened as an early user was that I started playing a bunch of early arcade games and a bunch of early code and – we have an internal development version of Live called Partnernet – so I'm on there and a bunch of the folks from work are on there, and I have 100 people on my friends list and we can go and see all our achievements that we're earning from different games. And I can see how competitive that's making us all, and how collaborative too, because you get on the headset and say: "How did you get that achievement? I can't even figure out the description – walk me through it." And it was really delightful – it was a great add to the system. And then the first production machines came in and I had to swap over and I lost it all! I lost everything. I had a gamer score of 1,100. I had 27 achievements, I'd played eight games, I'd finally beaten my friends on the *Geometry Wars* leaderboard, and then I had to start from scratch and it was totally demoralising! [Laughs] But it shows how much I'd invested in it, in two months and eight games, what I'd accomplished in the friendships I'd made and the achievements I'd earned. You know, I had over 1,000 Gs! I was so psyched when I broke 1,000! And now I'm at 90.

So, with 360 nearly here, what should Sony be feeling?

Hard to say. I don't know where they really are in their execution and their plan. It's my hope that we're encouraging them to think really deeply about online and to take a more customer-centric view instead of the hardware-centred view. I hope that they're thinking about broadening the audience as well – I guess I hope that their objectives are shifting to become more like our objectives because I think that's good for the industry as we start aligning around common goals and saying: "Let's grow the industry instead of fighting for share amongst the hardcore." So I hope they're thinking a little more consumer-centric, a little more online-centric, a little more developer-centric than they were thinking before we came into the business. Because developers need more from platform holders this generation because they're going to be struggling with production costs and scaling up – and consumers want more too.

With Nintendo's unveiling of the Revolution controller it's clear that it's trying to grow the market with a very different approach to yours. Why do you think Sony doesn't see market size as a problem?

Maybe it's because their dream's not big enough.



Project Gotham Racing 3 **seems to be the very model of a modern console videogame: visually spectacular, structurally liberal, fully Live enabled and, crucially, delivered for launch**







Completing the pre-Christmas launch window line-up are titles developed across current consoles or PC as well as for the 360, including *Need For Speed Most Wanted, Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06, Quake 4* and Neversoft's *Gun*

I want an Xbox next to every TV! I don't think we're big enough, I don't think we're done and I think the one thing that's a problem about Sony's approach is that it can be alienating. You know, I have a fair bit of disposable income but I'm not a guy that's going to go and buy two 1080p TV sets to enjoy a game. I'm not a guy who's sensitive enough to know what 120 frames per second means to me – I'm perfectly satisfied with the 24fps I get at the movie theatre. So I kind of look at that and I wonder if it doesn't alienate people a little bit. I mean as a technologist it's an interesting dream: "Hey, wouldn't it be cool if we had TV wrapped around our entire offices and everything was 360 degrees and everything was stereoscopic and everything was mastered at a resolution that was four times what the human cortex can actually interpret!" It's an exciting notion because then you could do so much more. But that's a $50,000 environment at scale and a $5 million environment today. So I worry it could alienate people from the category. You know, gee, I was worried about pushing hi-def. But there's nobody I've spoken to who says it isn't coming. So whether it takes off in '07, say it kicks off in '08, wouldn't it be nice if *PDZ* and *PGR3* and *Call Of Duty 2* looked great on that TV that you just bought, rather than you saying now I have to go and buy a new racing game and a new fighting game that looks great at hi-def? But we were actually a little nervous about putting as much emphasis as we did on hi-def, because we didn't want to alienate consumers into thinking: 'I can't buy that because I don't own a hi-def'. So I look at this dual 1080p, 120fps thing and I say, wow, that's some heavy science.

"We were actually a little nervous about putting as much emphasis as we did on hi-def, because we didn't want to alienate consumers"

Looking at the Revolution, with its controller and game download service, how important is



Live Arcade is another of Allard's favourite aspects of 360, though quite how he thinks the unblinking laser-storm of *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* (below) is an appropriate comedown after the intensity of *Call Of Duty 2* is a mystery



technology like that for growing the market, or is there still room for growth with conventional games?

I think there's still quite a ways – there's a business model problem in this industry which is kind of the elephant in the corner and that's the price of games. But the price-of-games conversation that most people are having at the moment is that the price of games is going to go up this generation. And you look at it and, boy, there's a huge rental and recycle market for games, partly because games are really expensive. And what we haven't done in the gaming industry is that we haven't brought advertising, sponsorship and product placement to bear in a way that could broaden the audience. Now, I don't think anyone in the world – except maybe people who work in advertising – would stand up and say: "I love advertising, I want more of it!" But the flipside of it is that I like the price of the internet, I like the price of TV which comes as a result of advertising. I like the fact I can buy your magazine on the store shelf and it doesn't cost me $27. Advertising allows us to hit economies of scale and allows us to have wider reach. If **Edge** didn't have advertising, how much more would it cost and how many fewer subscribers would it have? And yet that's what we're doing in the games industry – explicitly. We're saying we're doing without ads, we're doing it without the help of partners who want to reach that audience. So I think there are a lot of people who are richly interested in gaming and would be very dedicated to it, but they turn away because of cost. So there's a model there, where console manufacturers can take the steps with the hardware to reach a wider audience, so that publishers can reach greater scale and you can soften the price impact. And then you do things like online distribution, then you can bring the cost of games down and we can reach an wider audience and there's a business model there that hasn't been fully addressed.

What are you most looking forward to about the launch?

I'm just really looking forward to hearing back from people who've had a chance to play it. You know, it's one thing to see a trailer of something – if you'd seen a trailer of *GTA* or *The Sims*, you wouldn't have said: "20 million units." You'd have said: "Oh, that's kind of intriguing, but I could see how that *could* work," but when you go play it you have a different viewpoint altogether and that's what I'm really looking forward to seeing. These early games? They cut a lot of corners, they got hardware late – we came in hot with the hardware, because the differences between the alpha, the beta and the final versions were all material differences, so these early games are just scratching the surface. But I still think it's the best launch line-up of any console ever.





EVENT

Countdown to Lindbergh

Sega's final Private Show of 2005 found the company keeping its most-anticipated arcade sequels to itself





Unveiled under its Japanese title – *Power Smash 3* – the new *Virtua Tennis* is a bright, if incremental showcase of Lindbergh strength. At close range, its real-world competitors are better defined, but not perfectly. Tim Henman, Roger Federer and Lleyton Hewitt have again lent their likenesses to the series, along with many others

The lack of online battling in *Virtua Fighter 5* is sure to disappoint, but it's a justifiable decision. The fourth game's bouts proved impossible to stage online without ruinous lag, and any series acolyte will appreciate that concern

To arcade fans, Sega's autumn Private Show held at the start of November will have had the slightly awkward sensation of several previous shows, held more for tradition than demonstrable titles. Attendees hoping for a playable version of *Virtua Fighter 5*, obviously the standard bearer for the oncoming Lindbergh generation, were disappointed to find it present only in video form.

However, the Private Show did provide the first chance to see the standard Lindbergh cabinet, an aspect the bespoke setups of previously shown titles *House Of The Dead 4* and *Psy-Phi* (above left) had left unclear. The setup features an enviably high-quality Toshiba LCD widescreen, though it will not support HDTV resolution because of cost issues. Interestingly, the cabinet features only one (spacious) seat, requiring operators to buy two separate cabinets to facilitate versus play. While this could be seen as a purely commercial choice to offset manufacturing costs with a mandatory boost of cabinet sales, Sega feels it is taking the opportunity to direct the aesthetics of the next-generation arcade. By offering a more comfortable, optimal setup for individual players, it hopes to make arcade interiors more inviting to the wider audience that currently snubs them.

On the software side, *VF5*'s absence left a hole

Yu Suzuki's *Psy-Phi* will add another versus shooter to Sega's acclaimed line, though many who took to demo machines at the recent showing required assistance with its complex play mechanic



in the show lineup, with the removal of both the fighter and *After Burner Climax* from the schedule producing a sparse showfloor. AM2 felt neither title was complete enough for a hands-on demonstration: all efforts are likely now focused on bringing them to next February's AOU show.

Video footage of *Climax* showed the title to be visually and technically dazzling, but left questions over whether there would be enough play nuance to distinguish it from its ancestor. A hugely expensive remake of a straight arcade shooter may seem slightly misguided, but there's a sense that the game's commercial success is less important to Sega than as a catalyst for internal soul-searching. Having struggled for years to regain the relevance it once held in the arcades, Sega's image in Japan is now intertwined with its greatest massmarket success as 'the maker of *Mushiking*'. *Climax* is a return to the roots of the company's development sensibilities, although how directly the arcades' future can rely on the past is another story. That said, there were few present whose eyes failed to light up at the mention that the game will feature its own dedicated cabinet.

AM2 felt neither Virtua Fighter 5 nor After Burner Climax was complete enough for a hands-on demonstration

As the undisputed heavyweight of Sega's arcade lineup, though, *VF5* was done even less justice by a video-only showing. It will boast more visual customisation options than previous titles – with an expanded range of accessories and items, including tattoos, and an increase in character versions from two (one- and twoplayer) to four – but most in the *VF* cult of fighting were more interested to know how the game will further the series' (if not the genre's) development.

One possible direction is its use of the IC card and VF.NET network service, introducing a



Winning record

IC Cards finally take centre court in *Power Smash 3*

Having encouraged a personal touch in machines such as *Virtua Fighter 4* and *Ghost Squad*, the IC Card customisation system will also feature, for the first time, in a *Power Smash/Virtua Tennis* title. Medals earned following matches can be used to purchase new uniforms, while user-defined playing styles can also be saved for persistent use. World Rankings will be recorded for regular competitors, though it's not year clear how wide the game will spread its online net.







Interest in *After Burner Climax* isn't so much centred on its evidently radiant visuals as on its as-yet-unseen cabinet. A home port isn't beyond the realms of possibility, but the chances of its streamlined design working on console are slim





VF-dedicated TV channel to be broadcast in arcades and possibly on mobile phones. VF.TV will host match replays with voice commentary, and AM2 is working to display ranking updates in realtime on local arcade, area and nationwide levels. AM2 also indicated the possibility of scheduled interviews with developers and players, presumably offering discussion of technique. It's a similar vision to that of the 360's online community, and suggests that if arcade VF.TV isn't replicated outside of Japan, the inevitable 360 port could offer near-identical functionality over Live.

The playable Lindbergh lineup consisted of *Psy-Phi* and *Power Smash/Virtua Tennis 3*, the latter ably demonstrating the visual power of the new board, if not its potential for new experiences. Again, player customisation features heavily, with IC card support to record rankings and modification. Operators and media alike seemed to share the view that the game would prove a comfortably popular release with immediate appeal. The same couldn't be said for *Psy-Phi*, which despite its almost Nintendo-esque bid for control accessibility seems to lose that focus beyond the initial concept. Character designs are bland and forgettable, and the gameplay still feels underdeveloped: operators were also concerned by the high cost, suggesting its April release may be initially limited to Sega arcade centres.



Virtua Fighter fans will soon discover the dramatic, characteristic change that Sega has made to the latest instalment. Many believe it to be the removal of float combos from the fighting engine – an enormous adjustment that would reduce the game's mainstream accessibility even more, but consolidate its reputation as a demanding fighting system







Power Smash 3 looks notably better in motion than in stills, its crowds comprised of individual 3D models rather than fudged 2D. The game's audio seems strangely incomplete in the playable cabinet build, though the immediate sense of familiarity once the match begins says much about its control system





Two playable stages represented *Metal Slug 6* – one more for this Atomiswave build than was previously shown at this year's JAMMA Show. Widening the showcase of level, character and boss design, the demo was reassuringly similar to the early *Slugs*

Newswire



Gizmondo loses power

Scrutiny of the company's financial affairs has plagued the US launch of Gizmondo, and the departures of European director Carl Freer and executive Stefan Eriksson this month have done nothing to calm investors' fears. The resignations add an ignominious footnote to recent financial reports that suggested extraordinary executive perks to be a factor in Gizmondo's woes, alongside some rather anomalous transactions elsewhere. Two other employees – European manager Peter Uf and head of security Johan Enander – have also reportedly left the company, the latter currently wanted by police in his native Sweden. Tiger has since stated that 'several of the transactions described... were consummated without prior approval by the company's board of directors'. It is, however, unlikely that such comments will draw a line beneath this volatile situation.



EVENT

Conventional WarCraft

The inaugural BlizzCon celebration overruns the Anaheim Convention Centre with meetings, murlocs and multiplayer



We're back in Orange County to see Blizzard, though under different circumstances to our glimpse inside the developer last year – this time, we're accompanying 8,000 of its fans. Famed for keeping to itself as much as keeping to its own development schedule, it's a surprising move for the developer to let down its guard, even if it is among friends.

"We've always been very private," agrees **Paul Sams**, Blizzard's senior VP of business operations, "but more than any game we've done, *World Of WarCraft* is about community – there's four-and-a-half million paying subscribers. We don't plan to change what Blizzard's all about, but this was an opportunity to meet some of our most passionate supporters, and to give something back to them. I mean, we're *massively* losing money on this event, even with the fee we're charging."

Considering Blizzard's glacially deliberate pace, it's a short-term loss for a long-term investment – ensuring *WOW* continues to capture hearts, minds and credit cards. While Blizzard president Mike Morhaime's honestly humbled welcoming speech is regularly punctuated by applause, it is *WOW* producer **Shane Dabiri**'s feature announcements, and unveiling of expansion set *The Burning Crusade* (see p40), that brings the crowd to fever pitch. The promise of linked auction houses in every city – replacing the current isolated trading system – gets the biggest whoop, even more so



Attendees got into the spirit of cosplay with gusto – *WarCraft III* antihero Arthas made his return in at least three seperate cases, though he was outnumbered, much to observers' delight, by leather-clad succubi. But this display wasn't just a case of American fervour: "I was blown away by how many people came from overseas," Sams says. "We're very fortunate, and I think unique, to have a fan distribution of about a third in North America, a third in Europe and again in Asia, and it's been that way since about 2000"







Top: Metzen and VP of art direction Sam Didier fend off a somewhat off-topic interrogation on racial talent balancing in the art design panel. Above: you didn't have to wear a full set of cloth armour and regulation Alliance facial hair to try out the *WOW* expansion, but it helped

than the new continent or playable race. "During that introduction, I thought maybe I should just say 'Linked auction houses!' over and over," reflects Dabiri. "It's like, that went down well, let's try it again: 'Linked auction houses! ALL RIGHT!'"

"Linked auction houses are a big deal, because it brings relevance back to these other cities that are ghost towns right now," senior vice-president **Frank Pearce** explains. "I told Shane to mention it, and he was like: 'Someone's going to care about that?' I said it would be the most well-received feature on the list. And it was." Yet Pearce is happy to reveal he hasn't always been so prescient: "Of all the games that we've made, I would have picked *WOW* to have the least broad appeal," he grins. "Of course, it turned out to have the widest."

We recall Pearce remarking on the communication issues facing a growing 300-strong studio, and he laughs at the memory, telling us Blizzard now employs 1,600 staff (chiefly in *WOW* support) across American, European and Korean divisions. "It hasn't changed our core: there's just that many more people that know me that I don't know. We're still actively involved on a daily basis. It's good business sense, and plus I'm a gamer – I've got my level-60 troll rogue."

"We've hired more people in the past year than we've ever hired before," Sams admits. "But a lot of folks have been here a long, long time – February will be our 15-year anniversary. At Blizzard we hand out swords and shields when you hit five- and ten-year milestones, and now we'll be handing out 15-year awards; they get a ring and a helm."

How do they feel about those who've departed to much gaming community attention, before completing their item sets? "The guys that leave have great experiences to draw from, and it's understandable they want to see what they can do on their own," shrugs Pearce. "We're not a cult."

Nor does Blizzard deal in cult successes. We catch VP of creative development **Chris Metzen** before his round of Q&A panels, and ask how he feels about the prodigious colonisation of his world. For a moment, he's genuinely lost for words: "It's difficult to express, especially after seeing all these people here," he apologises. "No one anticipated this. It was such a different game for us: we knew it rocked, but being only online and pay-to-play, there were so many barriers to entry. And beyond all hope, beyond all expectation – 'beyond all hope', can you tell I'm a fantasy writer? – so many people that wouldn't normally play this type of game were interested. It's like the membrane has been pierced and everyone's suddenly very aware of these games, let alone *WOW* – this new space, these virtual worlds."

"History may make us look like clever game designers, but it's the community that will push all this forward"

As for what balance of design and serendipity drew so many through the hole *WOW* punched, Metzen is typically self-effacing: "History may make us look like very clever game designers, but it's the community that will push all this forward. We're trying to be responsible with it, and take our hits as they come, be aware of what they dig and what they don't – how funny was it this morning, 'Linked auction houses!' and everybody blows up? It's very telling that people have specific concerns, and we're here both to provide a vision and to support the kind of play that they want."

Looking at the BlizzCon crowd, we don't envy the production team's task of distilling exactly what such a diverse group does want. At times, life imitates forums, as a panel on art design proceeds









From top: Blood Elf royal guards and mages, *WOW* producer Shane Dabiri, VP of creative development Chris Metzen, and senior VP Frank Pearce (left) with senior VP of business development Paul Sams (right) plucked from panels, signings, interviews and floor mingling









The Burning Crusade was technically playable, but in earlier and briefer form than attendees might have hoped – only the initial quests in the Blood Elf homeland were on show. Responding to gentle heckling over the Valley Girl looks of the new Horde race, Metzen admits: "We should have called them the OC Elves"

in a comfortable atmosphere with seats to spare, while a sister discussion on player class balance is packed to standing room only, and bristles with statistically accurate heckling. Elsewhere, the sense of shared interest is more obvious: an invitational progamer *WarCraft III* and *StarCraft* tournament – a glimpse into another world for many attendees – draws massive crowds cheering every feint and gambit, while across the floor in the free-entry *WOW* Battlegrounds sessions, the queue roars for each amateur victory with similar spirit.

The Blizzard staff exploring their own convention are no strangers to the game's atypical appeal. "People like my siblings, who don't have a geeky gene in their bodies, will come out with: 'Hey, I've got this level 56, are you Alliance or Horde, what server are you on?' and I'm like [holds hands up] 'Whoa there!'" describes Metzen. Sams reveals the existence of a formidable official society: "I'd say somewhere in the neighbourhood of 30-50 per cent of the Blizzard wives and girlfriends actually have guilds, Blizzard wife guilds, and they have raid nights where they tell us: 'You'd better be watching the kids'." This diversity, and the litmus test of the convention's response, has obviously had an effect on *WOW*'s future direction, apparently favouring a return to drop-in-and-drop-out content rather than demanding heavy time commitment (except on raid nights, of course).

"I'd say 30-50 per cent of the Blizzard wives and girlfriends actually have guilds, and they have raid nights where they tell us: 'You'd better be watching the kids'"

"It's always been clear to us that making an MMO is much different to a boxed game – we're developing it, but everyone else is helping us too," Dabiri says. "We saw the feeling among players that they didn't have the time or people to do the big raids, and that's where our philosophy of smaller raid content came from. They're part of the process: it's a collaborative effort between us and the community."

Interestingly, the meeting of the two communities – in massively multiplayer numbers, on Blizzard's own ground – seems to have had as profound an effect on the developers as the fans. Though the show suffers first-time difficulties under the sheer number of attendees – an experience perhaps a little too familiar for *WOW* players – it's a celebration that will leave few without stories.

"I was here before the show helping pack the



The *StarCraft* and *WarCraft III* progamer invitational drew massive crowds – this is only the second row – helping to keep both games very much alive in the minds of attendees

Newswire



Bioware and Pandemic partner up

In what's described as a 'partnership of equals' by Bioware joint chairman Ray Muzyka (above) the *Baldur's Gate* creator and *Full Spectrum Warrior* developer Pandemic have become allied via a high profile buyout by private equity firm Elevation Partners. Elevation – whose recent bidding war with SCi for Eidos ended in failure – has spent $300 million on the deal which will see the developers operate separately as Bioware/Pandemic Studios. The founders of each will retain their shares and seats on the holding company board, while Elevation chairman and ex-EA president John Riccitiello will be on the developers' board.







"I've seen more murlocs in these past two days than I think I ever wanted to," Dabiri says of the fish-people's show invasion: the spectacular (and uncomfortable) costume below right was a deserved contest winner



8,000 goody bags, and when I was walking back there were already people outside," says Pearce. "I was like: 'You guys have got 14 hours to go', but they were just hanging out and relaxing, so I came back out later to chat with them. I think this is a healthy passion for people: there are a lot of worse things people could do with their time. It's created a culture that's much bigger than *WOW*, and it boggles my mind that people are selling T-shirts that reference this culture. And I have one – I bought a Penny Arcade shirt that says 'Rogues do it from behind'."

For Dabiri, it's the culmination of his career to date: "When I started at Blizzard 11 years ago, we went to CES to show *WarCraft* with a booth the size of a table, a television showing a *WarCraft* video, and four people standing in front of it vigorously explaining the game to anyone who'd listen. And now we're here today with all these fans... it's an amazing feeling."

The convention closes with what's billed as an Offspring concert, though showgoers who turned in their tickets for a $35 rebate will have missed Blizzard's finest half-hour. Morhaime takes the stage again to give a formal farewell, and then returns with an informal farewell as bass player in Level 60 Elite Tauren Chieftan, an all-Blizzard-executive hair metal band. During a power ballad for *WOW* community in-joke Leeroy Jenkins, the lead vocalist (and VP of art direction) exhorts the crowd to raise their lighters, and the Anaheim Arena glitters with hundreds of swaying points of light. It's a perfect, and perfectly surreal, demonstration of *WOW*'s unlikely shared wonder: next year, Blizzard is going to need a bigger venue.



A large *StarCraft: Ghost* multiplayer area debuted second playable race the Zerg (the Protoss are next to be implemented). Still a work-in-progress, it shows a suitably *StarCraft* depth of unit interplay – although many players weren't inclined towards teamwork

OUT THERE



ALTER EGO MANIA

After a successful opening in 2004 at Camden's Proud Gallery, photographer Robbie Cooper is going global with his Alter Ego project, which juxtaposes photos of gamers with their online avatars. Cooper ventured further east to the hotbed of the MMO scene, where he documented not only rank and file Asian players, but, more notably, the personalities and living conditions of those earning their living in the virtual world. Cooper will be taking his updated on the show throughout Europe and on to America in 2006.

A new gaming sensation

Philips' sensory surround experience, amBX, provides the potential to extend games beyond the screen



Front of the revolution

A developer's view of the amBX system

One developer who's been working closely with Philips during the development of amBX is Revolution Software's Charles Cecil (above).

"I was asked down to the Surrey labs because the team had been using various games to test the technology. Some of the best results they got were with *Broken Sword 3*," Cecil reveals.

There were several reasons for this. One was the way the in-game camera works. Unlike the standard approach of allowing the player to control the camera, as an adventure game, *Broken Sword 3* took a more restrictive approach with fixed camera angles framing the action. This also meant Revolution paid more attention to the lighting of scenes. The result was a game in which changes in ambient lighting greatly enhanced the onscreen action.

"We spent a couple of days playing the game and working out what worked well and what didn't so we could come up with a ruleset to help developers," Cecil says. "For sudden events such as a scene with lightning, amBX worked very well, but you had to be much more careful with subtle changes so the amBX lighting didn't contradict what was actually happening on the screen either in terms of its colour or its direction and intensity."

And by the end of the process, Cecil was a convert. "We'll definitely be using amBX in future games," he says. "I think this is part of a wider trend of people installing ambient lighting in their house. Philips has done a lot of research before announcing amBX and now it's moving forward with confidence."

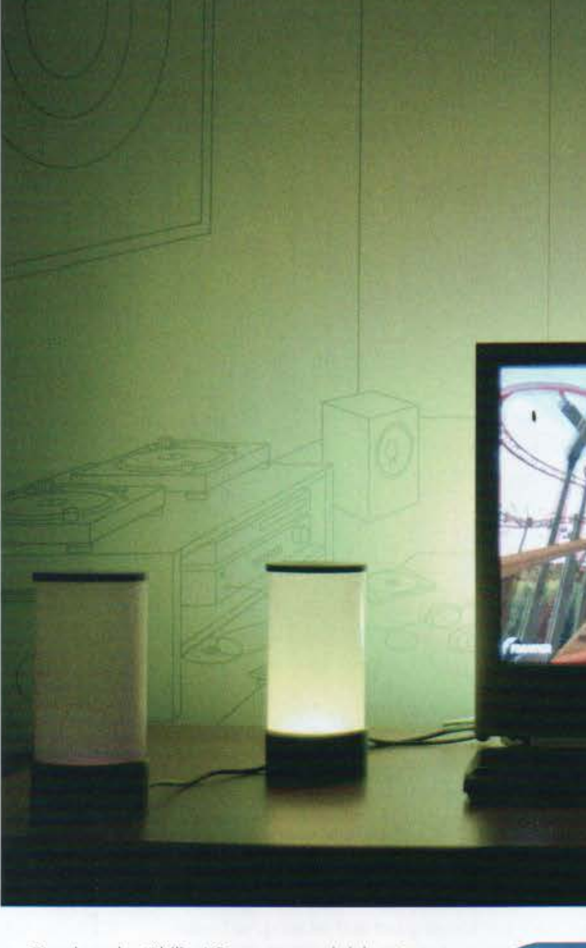
If the videogame industry is about anything, it's about spectacular entertainment. Too often fixated by higher resolution graphics, gamers' senses have also been extended thanks to multi-channel surround sound and force-feedback controllers. But if the latest technological push from Dutch electronics giant Philips is anything to go by, there's plenty of extra sensory excitement to look forward to.

Linking together all manner of devices from surrounding ambient lighting to hot-air fans and vibrating furniture, it could change the way games are experienced

Entitled amBX, it's a framework designed to allow developers to expand the impact of games beyond the screen. Linking together all manner of devices from surrounding ambient lighting to hot-air fans and vibrating furniture, amBX's architect **David Eves** reckons it could change the way games are experienced.

"The key behind the development of amBX was the realisation we could bring the gameworld out of the screen and into the living room," he explains. "Technologies such as surround sound have already started to do this, but it was clear there were many more possibilities available. While opportunities beyond hi-def and photorealism seem to become limited for screen-based technologies, amBX provides a new creative potential."

Peripherals designed to enhance the immersive impact of games are ten-a-penny, but few are ambitious enough to take on your entire living room. It's hard to imagine the development mainstream finding time or market for widespread amBX support yet, but Philips' dogged persistence might just change the mood



Developed at Philips' Surrey research laboratory over several years, amBX is one strand of the company's research into ambient intelligence – a program of trying to improve the quality of everyday life through interaction with household objects which contain some processing power and are connected together.

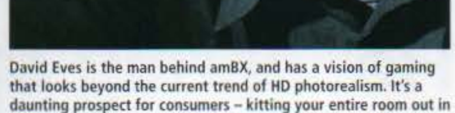
Targeted mainly at games, although with obvious applications for other forms of home entertainment, the process of rolling out amBX is twofold. Currently still in a pre-release stage, Philips is working with key developers and publishers in order to be able to provide software development tools by May 2006. These will give developers the ability to define how games will make use of any amBX-enabled objects available to them. This is carried out using a simple mark-up scripting language and a software engine which is integrated into the game and amBX hardware.











David Eves is the man behind amBX, and has a vision of gaming that looks beyond the current trend of HD photorealism. It's a daunting prospect for consumers – kitting your entire room out in component technology – but enthusiasts may jump at the chance

"To create the best possible experience is a creative process and our scripting language is designed to be able to capture the high-level description of a game designer's intentions," says Eves. "For example, a developer will write a script to define what happens when a rocket hits a wall. When it's triggered in-game, our engine then mediates between the author's intention and the capabilities of devices in the room." The result could be anything from rapid flashes of coloured lighting to a blast of hot air and a violent rumble from the back of your seat.

Eves says gamers will also be able to write their own scripts, creating the possibility of a mod-style amBX community, creating its own extreme sensory reactions to games – whether more spectacular or perhaps even satirical reactions to what's happening onscreen.

"It's certainly our intention to provide tools to the wider gaming community and to allow people to create their own experiences," he says. "Scripts can be easily shared and downloaded and Philips will facilitate this by providing our own extra content and forums for the amBX community."

The second part of the process is getting hardware and peripheral manufacturers interested in releasing amBX-enabled hardware – something that's planned for toward the end of 2006, with the PC being the likely launch platform.

Eves says it's too early to say what sort of products will be launched, although within its own demonstration room, Philips has experimented with various forms of dynamic lighting, air movement from fans and heaters, rumblers and interface devices as well as additional audio and video devices. "We expect many of these concepts to be realised but amBX is designed to let hardware manufacturers' imaginations run wild," he says. "Every day we're getting suggestions we hadn't thought of."

But such flights of fantasy aside, the bottom line for amBX's future success will be whether or not players will be convinced that paying for extra ambience adds anything exciting to the experience of playing a screen-based game. As many virtual reality visionaries, and perhaps even Nintendo with its Revolution controller, have found out to their cost, gamers can be a conservative bunch.

Eves remains enthusiastic, however. "As has been proved by the range of user tests we've carried out, gamers thrive on an improved experience," he says. "We've shown amBX to many hundreds of people of all interests, backgrounds and ages and it's met with universal excitement."





WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

On Games That Weren't, creator Frank Gasking has led the charge in exhaustively cataloguing over 650 C64 games that for one reason or another never saw the light of day, and has taken it upon himself to track down as many as possible – most from their coders' attics – for restoration and archival.

The site covers the gamut from half-finished previews, like *Armalyte 2*, to one-level proofs of concept and near-complete works, such a full port of *Solar Jetman* – one of the site's biggest finds, whose publisher bailed shortly before release.

Gasking has also included, where available, candid commentary from the coders themselves explaining the stories behind the games.

Site: **Games That Weren't**
URL: **www.gtw64.co.uk**



CLUBBERS IN SPACE

News of actor Jon Jacobs' $100,000 (£56,200) purchase of a virtual spacestation in MMORPG *Project Entropia* spread quickly across a bewildered internet, but his vision behind the deal intends to further bridge the gap between the live and virtual worlds. In an interview with the BBC, Jacobs revealed his plans to convert the space into Club Neverdie (named after his *Entropia* character), and offer the space to entertainment and media companies for live in-game performances, and is said to be currently in talks with 'some of the world's biggest DJs' to spin sets for the digital crowd.

• www.project-entropia.com



"[Game Boy Micro] looks more like a mobile phone than a games machine."
The Guardian's clearly been spending time with all those mobile phones featuring D-pads and only two face buttons

"At this time of the year I tend to catch an affectation; this is much more troublesome than a cold. The affectation caught up with me this year. After TGS it has become most troublesome. Loneliness. I feel almost to the point of being crushed by it. Isolation! I must press through this. I should shop for a new leather jacket; a new jacket will protect me from the loneliness carried on the wind."
Ever get the feeling that **Hideo Kojima** sees the world a little differently to other game developers?

"Nintendo has finally recognised the importance of product design."
The Guardian on the same Nintendo that introduced the D-pad, analogue sticks on joypads, shoulder buttons, and so on

"For the first 30 minutes, Black & White 2 inspires nothing but slack-jawed awe."
The Guardian's review copy of Lionhead's god sim must've been missing the fist-gnawing tutorial section everyone else had to endure



***GPC*'s attention to detail is spectacular – you're even given the option to apply or remove reflection effects from the virtual sheets of glass that cover its wide range of pintables**



INTERVIEW

Rebooting the System

Stalwart of the '80s System 3 is making a a comeback – and it's all about game sharing

Having made his name in the '80s as head of System 3 Software (the company behind the likes of the acclaimed *Last Ninja* series and the less-revered-but-equally-talked-about *Twister: Mother Of Charlotte*), **Mark Cale** (right) has since made it big with the super-successful Play-It budget range. We caught up with him as he prepared to relaunch the System 3 label with *Gottlieb Pinball Classics* on PSP.



Why did you decide to resurrect System 3?
Well, System 3 was the leading UK publisher for quality computer games in the '80s. American companies like EA, Epyx, Broaderbund, Synapse, Datasoft and LucasArts were producing great computer games that rivalled it, but there was no real competition from other European companies – our titles sold extremely well, we topped the charts and received industry awards. *Last Ninja 1* on the C64, for example, sold over 5.7m copies in Europe, which was an industry milestone – Commodore's machine had an installed base of 21m, which means *Last Ninja 1* had a one-in-four attachment rate. It went on to be the most successful C64 game ever in terms of unit sales. Activision was our distributor and if you think that we represented 80 per cent of their global revenue in 1988, you can see why System 3 as a brand is so strong.

That's the history, but to answer your question, System 3 has a great brand value built around quality games, so as a full-price label with a back catalogue of brands like *IK*, *Last Ninja*, etc, it's the right label to use as a full-price publisher on next-gen machines.

The first System 3 title, *Gottlieb Pinball Classics*, is a new game and not a release from our back catalogue. Why is this our first release? Because we want people to know that System 3 can still make great new games – and some journalists have said that they think it could be the best pinball game ever released on any format. Which isn't a bad start for the rebirth of System 3.

***Pinball Classics* is the first PSP game to use game-sharing technology; was this difficult to implement?**
Anything using wi-fi is difficult because it depends on where and when you receive a game – interference from other networks or PSPs and mobiles can make your game lose packets of information. The trick has been to try to keep the connection as reliable as possible. There is also a limit of just eight megabytes that can be transmitted to a guest machine, and that can also make it tricky to keep the framerate up while still







System 3 Software has plans to resurrect Epyx's *Games* series (*California* edition pictured top) and its own *International Karate* (above) on PSP, making full use of game sharing, meaning that groups of players will need only one copy of the game in order to set up full multiplayer sessions. The technology will be first used in *Gottlieb Pinball Classics* (left), which brings together a super-slick collection of tables and can be played either horizontally or vertically (right)



keeping track of the game packets between the two PSPs. But with *Pinball Classics* we've managed it and we keep the screen refresh at 60fps.

With game sharing you can have one game disc working two PSPs, and I think this is the start of a whole new world of community gaming – I'm personally am a big fan of it and I think it distinguishes real value over a twoplayer game on a TV-based console.

You've bought up the rights to Epyx's back catalogue – why did you do that?

System 3 and Epyx are, to most gamers, the two best publishers that produced games for the C64 – look at any fan sites and you'll always see *Last Ninja 1, 2* or *3* and *IK* in the top ten, as well as *Impossible Mission* and *California Games* as their all-time favourites. We originally licensed *International Karate* to Epyx – they launched the game in the States as *World Championship Karate* and put it at number one in the US Billboard charts. That was a first for a European title. They also created some of the best ever pick-up-and-play computer games, with *Impossible Mission* being my favourite… Apart from Synapse, Epyx produced probably the best games of that time, and they certainly inspired me at a young age. It really is an honour and a privilege to be able to now produce these Epyx titles on the PSP.

How about old System 3 IP? Do you have any plans for bringing it back to life?

Absolutely. Why would you not? As I say, we're working on *International Karate* and *Last Ninja* for all next-gen machines but in particular the PSP. We'll have a lot to show at E3 next year.

What's your view on what seems like a sort of resurrection in 2D gaming happening right now, what with games like *EXIT*, a new *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* and *Lemmings* being made on PSP?

I think that keeping original games as they were gameplay-wise but updating the graphics to a super-lush arcade standard is the right direction in most cases. Gamers want to replay their old favourites on portable devices like the PSP and the DS but don't expect them to have 1980s graphics. The fundamentals of the gameplay that make it work are always there – take *Pac-Man* as an extreme example; Namco put out the original as part of an arcade compilation on the PSP but also delivered another version with up-to-date graphics on the same UMD. That is a smart move. *Lemmings* and *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* would cease to be what they were if they go full-on 3D. Look at *Worms* – a great franchise but when Team 17 went 3D with it, it ceased to be *Worms* and lost its charm. It just didn't feel like *Worms* any more, it ceased to be what it was, and I think that move seriously damaged the franchise. *Metal Slug* is another example – a great series but when they tried it in 3D it lost its charm.

"I think that keeping original games as they were gameplay-wise but updating the graphics to a super-lush arcade standard is the right direction in most cases"

What's your take on the DS and PSP handheld scene in a wider sense?

I think this will mark a new chapter in gaming history as truly the start of community gaming. The idea of game-sharing titles on both machines, with just one player owning the game, is the unique USP over and above all the hype of movies and music.

I think publishers have to be aware that games that play well on, say, a PS2 just don't work on the PSP. I'd much rather play an in-depth game on a 50-inch monitor than struggle to see that thirdperson world on a PSP, especially when games take so much time to complete. The ideal game on PSP is one that you dive into and out of whilst travelling on a tube or during your lunch break. That's why I think that *California Games* and the rest of the *Games* series from Epyx is so strong on this format, because it delivers just that experience. Look at *Virtua Tennis* on the PSP. That is what I mean by a game that allows you to go in and out of it very quickly. It's the ideal game on the PSP but it lacks game sharing, and I'm sure that the idea of meeting a friend somewhere who happens to have his PSP and the same game as you is quite remote. But put in game sharing and you have a real pick-up-and-play portable experience. That's why we're so excited by *Gottlieb Pinball Classics* – we're the first with game sharing.

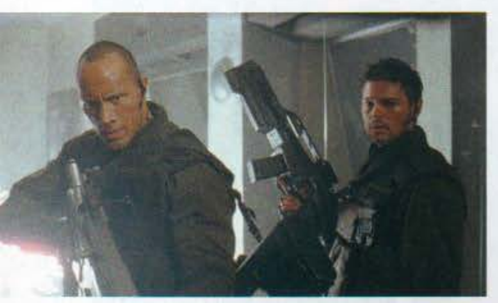






Doom dumbs up

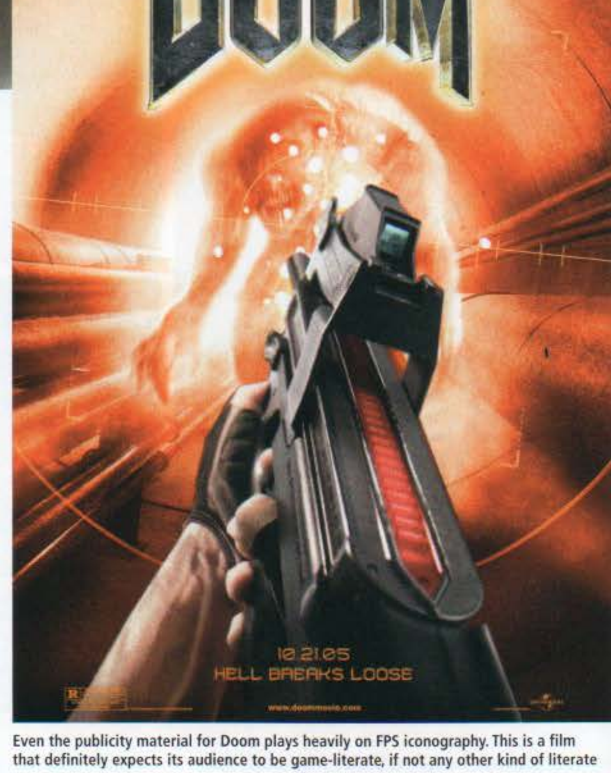
Hollywood confounds expectations with a videogame movie that's too clever by half





The importance of Universal's film adaptation of *Doom* is hard to explain. It's hardly the most costly or high-profile game adaptation to date, that honour belonging to Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, which had almost double Doom's modest $60m-odd budget. Perhaps it's simply that the decision to adapt such a venerable franchise suggests the movie industry starting to take videogames seriously as source material, not just a cash-crop of passing fads. A chance to see the film ahead of its UK release on December 2 proved that suspicion to be half-right.

Doom is more knowing and sophisticated than many will have expected – or even wanted. Unlike most of its predecessors, it is acutely aware of its roots and of the gamers in its audience, showering them in in-jokes and sly, self-conscious incidental detail. One of the scientists at the Mars research station under mysterious attack is called Dr Carmack; one of the marines sent to clear up the mess is seen playing a handheld *Galaxian* LED game (this is a peculiarly bygone future, it seems); an excuse is even contrived to show a gun hovering and spinning in mid-air. And then there is the film's unavoidable talking point, that five-minute FPS sequence. It's more funny than frightening, and strangely quaint: it has all the goggle-eyed, sideshow thrill of a circus ghost train or Victorian cinematograph. But the homage it pays to the visual signature of videogames is literal and extremely emphatic, even more so than the Matrix's dojo scene, or the Phantom Menace's pod race.



Even the publicity material for Doom plays heavily on FPS iconography. This is a film that definitely expects its audience to be game-literate, if not any other kind of literate

These public displays of affection for Doom's medium of birth are, however, mostly for show. Heavy on the claustrophobia and suspense, the film is more *Doom 3* than *Doom*, but more Event Horizon (to pick a space-horror B-movie at random) than either. It simply can't afford to be the full-throttle bloodbath or baroque creature-feature that the games are, opting instead for a twist that lets it play its human characters off each other. The grand finale even drops the guns for a mano-a-mano fistfight, while the games' bluntly gothic vision of a Hell dimension is fudged with the psycho-mysticism and cod-science so beloved of contemporary sci-fi ("Ten percent of the human genome remains unmapped... some believe it the blueprint for the human soul" indeed).

Screenwriter David Callaham (according to his press biog, a Bigfoot and Loch Ness Monster enthusiast who participates in imaginary play-by-mail professional wrestling in his spare time) must be admired for finding a human dimension to *Doom*, and it's probably the better film for it. It's certainly, as far as game adaptations go, the best of a bad bunch to date. But the human dimension is not the one that fans of this particular videogame series were hoping to see.

The homage it pays to the visual signature of videogames is literal and extremely emphatic, even more so than the Matrix's dojo scene, or The Phantom Menace's pod race

Opening in the US on October 21, Doom met with a significantly mixed response from critics. Cinephiles seemed so horrified and threatened by its signature firstperson tracking shot that they struggled to see past it to the surrounding film, while genre aficionados praised its economy (it's a brisk 94 minutes long) and relative smarts. The ultimate critic – the box office – was decidedly lukewarm, awarding it top spot in the charts but a low $15.5 million in takings over its opening weekend, in a generally depressed climate for ticket sales. That's more than $2m shy of the figure achieved by the considerably cheaper Resident Evil, itself a fifth of the tally of record-holder Spider-Man 2. Attendance tailed off quickly thereafter, but the buoyant DVD market will probably see Doom into profit. Even if it doesn't, videogaming's very real threat to Hollywood's traditional business will ensure that it's not the last game adaptation to grace the big screen.



The appearance of former GamesMaster host Dexter Fletcher (left) is probably the most obscure and least intentional of many gaming references. The Rock, who wisely turned down the lead role for a more chewy character part, is as watchable as ever, but the excellent Rosamund Pike (above right) is in a class of her own







Perfectly understandable jubilation courtesy of Capcom, the company's *Resident Evil 4* repeating its success (both commercially and critically) on PS2 having taken GameCube by storm

Golden greats

The biggest awards ceremony in UK gaming see San Andreas steal the prizes

It was that time of the year again for the Golden Joystick Awards, and that time of the week again for Jimmy Carr. One of the industry's more publicly recognised events – staged in association with The Sun newspaper, BBC Radio One, The Carphone Warehouse and others – it collected over 200,000 votes from around the country for its 19 categories. *GTA: San Andreas* walked away with five awards including those for best hero, villain and soundtrack, while both the PSP and DS triumphed in the gaming innovation and handheld game categories respectively (*Super Mario 64 DS* being the game in question).

Though the hailing of *Resident Evil 4* as best film-based game of 2005 continues to inspire confusion, it should be pointed out that the equally maligned one-to-watch-for-Christmas category – won by the famously delayed *Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess* – was actually decided by votes cast prior to that delay being announced. Less contentious winners included *Halo 2*, *Half-Life 2* and again *San Andreas* and *Resident Evil 4*, each voted game of the year for their original formats. Then, of course, there were the inevitables: *World Of WarCraft*'s online game of the year award, for example. *Fahrenheit*'s acknowledgement as the year's unsung hero was a welcome choice, though the near universal praise it's had from critics makes the award reassuringly moot.

Continue

Wi-fi
Look, even Nintendo has given it its blessing

Rock'n'roll
Guitar Hero truly is more than a feeling

Premium pack
Or 'The good pack' as some store staff call it

Quit

Core pack
Or, 'The shit pack' as some store staff call it

RSI
Guitar Hero truly is the feeling of arthritis

Wires
We think we've had enough now, thanks



PROVENDER GLEED

It's back to the future for a romping yarn set in a world run by powerful yet secretive families

When it comes to fictional alternative versions of history, the temptation is to pile on the irony, pivoting world events on humorous acts of insignificance: say the failure of the Russia revolution when Lenin drowned bobbing for apples, or Churchill's aneurysm after two bottles of good claret and a particularly tricky Times crossword. Thankfully, in Provender Gleed, a tale of continued Edwardian stability writ large on the back of Godfather-style familial hegemonies, James Lovegrove resists. Instead he deftly walks a tightrope between a world in thrall of powerful influences (even those with characters named after the exotic spices on which their wealth is based), merged with one in which detectives solve cases based on deciphering anagrams of their suspects' names, and airships remain the preferred mode of transport.

The clever bit is that, interspersed around an unconsummated love story, nothing is quite overt enough for labels such as magical realism, histo-sci-fi or steampunk to stick, although elements of all are present. Instead, perhaps the best description of Provender Gleed, a tale of an heir struggling against his destiny, is an old fashioned romp. More often than not used as faint praise, in this case it encompasses both the pacing of the plot, as it skids between kidnap, escape, intrigue and discovery, as well as the book's overall readability. Not high literature, it remains extremely enjoyable. Here's hoping this won't be the last heard of Messers Gleed and the anagrammatic detectives.



LUNAR PARK

Glossy chronicler of excess enters his own spotlight in pseudo-autobiographical chiller

It's always been a given there's no one Bret Easton Ellis loves more than himself. While contemporary Douglas Coupland empathised with the travails of the McJob generation, Easton Ellis took a topdown view. His familiars were the amoral rich kids of the Valley, who snorted and slept with whatever they could lay their hands on before becoming famous and successful in the rich amoral worlds of LA and NYC. To that extent, it's always been something of a triumph he's managed to drag his readers kicking and screaming through the likes of American Psycho and Glamorama. And, with Lunar Park, they'll face their biggest challenge yet. At least there's a familiar lead character: one Bret Easton Ellis.

Reunited with his actress wife, son and stepdaughter, he's cleaned up his act. No booze or coke, he's limited to handfuls of prescription tranquilisers that keep him on track in the warm glow of domestic bliss. Yet as with other Easton Ellis characters, the membrane between reality and twisted self-destruction masquerading as amusement is quickly slashed. A weight of circumstances that could perhaps be rationally explained if he hadn't slipped back into chugging quarts of vodka and other headspinning cocktails begins to build. Emails sent from the bank where his hated father's ashes are stored collide with a paranormal phenomenon and then characters from his previous books start to emerge from the shadows. Ultimate self-gratification or smart deciphering of the ties that bind, the conclusion remains up for grabs.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Gradius Portable

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



The first four arcade titles join the PlayStation's *Gaiden* episode (above) in a welcome PSP throwback. Movie galleries, together with widescreen support for episodes one and two, also feature

Warhammer: Mark Of Chaos

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



The *Armies Of Exigo* team at Black Hole Entertainment promises an astounding level of detail for its depiction of Warhammer's world of war. Early screens give us little reason to cast doubt

Metronome

FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** TBA



Still exciting, still gorgeous and still unsigned? Team Tarsier is keeping its lips sealed regarding potential publishers, though the publicity machine continues regardless. Expect a closer look soon

Alone In The Dark

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** ATARI



A night alone in the park (Central, that is) takes the enduring series in a number of new directions, the trailer suggesting a mix of *RE4* control and, intriguingly, *Disaster Report*-style set-pieces

Jaws Unleashed

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** MAJESCO



False alarm. Everyone back in the water. Pushed back to 2006 alongside *Infected*, this eat 'em up from the *Ecco* developers at Appaloosa clearly has some teething troubles left to overcome

Crashday

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** ATARI



A developer with a self-proclaimed love of *Burnout*, *Stuntman* and *Carmageddon* brings us a game that wants to be them all. Can Replay's pile-up of styles handle itself with distinctive flair?

Em Enchant Arm

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** FROM



Conspicuous in its absence from X05, speculation is still rife as to the fine details of From's big adventure. Just how many discs will it require, for instance, once its HD cinematics are introduced?

Voodoo Nights

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** MINDWARE



A proudly announced slow-motion DeadTime mode and coop picture-in-picture aren't exactly the most original next-gen notions, but at least the shadowy art style provokes interest

Splinter Cell 4

FORMAT: 360, TBA **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



A dead daughter, a criminal record and a 20-year stretch inside is taking its toll on a transformed Sam Fisher. Mystery and antihero cliché abounds in Ubisoft's stealthy escape from series tradition



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Cloud

www.thatcloudgame.com

Dedicated to 'those who used to love the blue sky and the white clouds', interactive media students at the University of Southern California School of Cinema and Television have released a short four-level demo of *Cloud*, their entry into the forthcoming Independent Games Festival.

Sparse but fantastically meditative, the game denies players drawn-out mechanics and goal explanations, and instead sets the scene with little more than an evocative still and a short sentence, then sets them loose in the sky.

Gameplay is as simple as pointing a nightshirt-clad dreamer into the clouds and dragging the liquid cotton puffs together, or utilising them to push back and shrink dark patches of smog, causing storms that rain on the scattered islands below.

Few modern comparisons spring to mind, though take *Katamari Damacy*'s purposeful hoarding and the atmospheric scale of some of its later levels, then replace all of the frenetic energy with unshakable peace and a grand sweeping score, and you're getting much warmer.

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Is Japan in need of a revolution?

Christophe Kagotani goes shopping to take the industry's temperature



Lately, Japanese videogame stores seem to have become like mirrors of today's game industry as a whole. At their entrances, 'wagon sale' corners have begun to pop up. They started as just a couple of shelves but now they've reached bigger proportions, sometimes occupying huge wagons. They have become the graveyard of an industry that is openly struggling.

The games that end up in these wagons are all different, but they're here for the same reason: they simply failed to sell at their original prices. Some were almost destined to end there because of the way they were designed, produced or marketed, while others are simply victims of their own IP: their themes no longer have the appeal they once enjoyed or, indeed, were expected to create. Sometimes their choice of host platform is at fault; sometimes it's simply a matter of timing. To clear stocks, their prices are slashed, sometimes marginally, more often significantly. This way, game publishers give stores the opportunity to put new titles on their shelves but also the chance to get some mileage out of more disappointing releases. Occasionally this allows games to record comfortable sales figures that do not truly reflect the reality of the situation.

Near the wagons there are often other cheap sections, filled with budget-priced DVDs. More and more movie companies have begun to exploit the budget end of the market, launching films – some recent and big-name releases among them – for just ¥990 (less than £5). While very little attention is often given to games' wagon sales, customers gather around the DVD sections, buying two or three movies at a time.

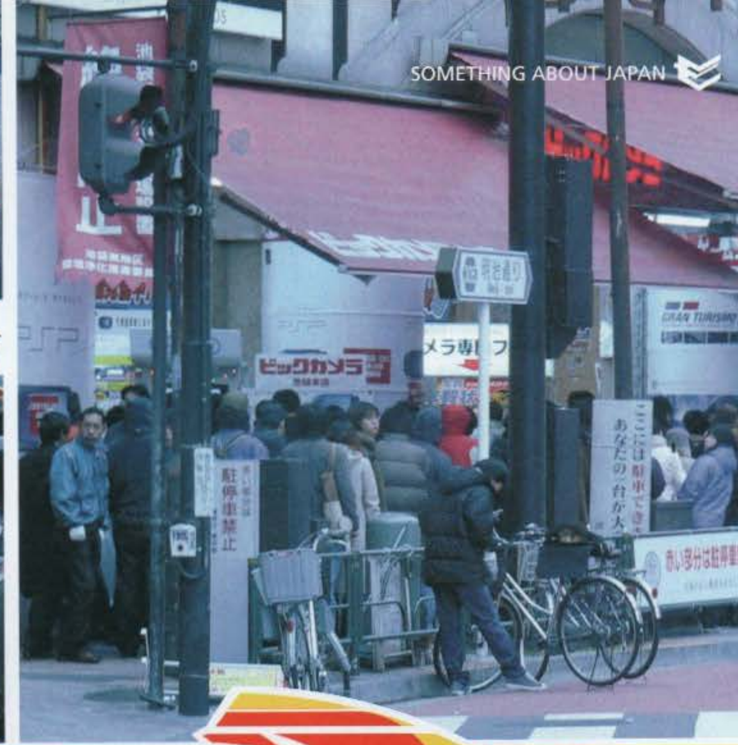
Many people say that the videogame industry has surpassed the movie industry, but is that really so? Could the figures used to support such claims actually be wrong, or even just misleading? For most movies, there are several opportunities to make money – first at theatres, then with rentals and sales. Can videogames compete on a similar level? Well, perhaps in the past, when many games were released first as coin-ops and later adapted for consoles, but now that's not the case. Game publishers have to count on all of their revenues from consumer sales. To make matters worse, at least in Japan, the digital audio revolution has also taken lots of potential revenue from the game industry. Apple's iPods are everywhere in Tokyo, for instance. Music, movies and games are part of a single market where the competition for a share of the action is fierce.

Can videogames compete on a similar level to movies? Well, perhaps in the past, when many games were released first as coin-ops and later adapted for consoles, but not now. All revenues now have to come from consumer sales

Of course, today's consoles are more and more



A typical wagon sale offers up a selection of interesting and not-so-interesting multiformat titles (left)









While many console releases struggle to sell in big numbers, many DS titles enjoy healthy sales – the newest *Tamagotchi* (above left) and *Phoenix Wright* (above right) among them

designed to address this by allowing all these forms of entertainment to be managed on one single device. For the videogame industry, it is time to reclaim their market share. Two out of the three next-generation consoles will offer the ultimate user experience, with never-before-seen levels of power, comfort (HDTV, enhanced audio, wireless connectivity) and interactivity (internet connectivity). Clearly these consoles require huge investment for developers, and it looks like fewer game makers will be able to exploit these powerful machines let alone finance their projects. Fewer games will therefore be made, which may – *may* – result in better sales for those that do make it to market.

In the meantime, the industry also believes that it is time to change game interfaces and therefore gamers' playing habits – which have been there almost from the very beginning – by designing new control setups and engineering genuinely new experiences. The onset of a new generation of gaming hardware will represent a moment of truth for the Japanese videogame industry, but positive signs are already emerging. Many gamers and developers here have been excited by Sony's PS3 demos and the revolutionary concept behind the Revolution (Xbox 360 doesn't really register in the same way, unfortunately). And, right now, the continued success of Nintendo's DS is showing that not everything needs to be thrown into the wagon in order to get noticed.



The Simple 2000 series (below) was never intended for wagon sale status – the games were budget releases to begin with. Now, however, much higher profile releases from big publishers are being reduced in order to get noticed







Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Amped 3



It's partly the genuinely funny trailer, it's partly the vast play area, but it's mostly that all you really want for Christmas, even more than a 360, is some proper snow.
360, 2K GAMES

Snake Plissken's Escape



Announced three years ago and scheduled for release this winter, has the original (and let's face it, the best) Snake been scared into submission by Kojima's bluster?
TBA, NAMCO

Animal Crossing: Wild World



The arrival of *Mario Kart DS* has prompted something of a wi-fi frenzy, and once your DS is online its impossible not to fantasise about making the world your own.
DS, NINTENDO

Freedom's reigns

Is repression the key to an appreciable sandbox?



Deus Ex: Invisible War built itself a world of suggested opportunity, yet few of its various taskmasters and transporters let you make the big decisions. But was that necessarily so bad?

As with the founding of any nation, the question of control over liberty is increasingly being asked among developers of both online and offline virtual worlds, and it's one that takes a lot of thought and a few regrettable mistakes to answer. "Whenever, wherever, whatever – the three Ws," is Atari chairman **Bruno Bonnell**'s self-proclaimed mantra for the year, but while pick-up-and-play design is what he's actually suggesting, the approach to freedom within Atari's portfolio – indeed, within that of the entire game industry – is an interesting subtext. It was, after all, an overambitious attempt to liberate gamers that gave us *Boiling Point.*

Test Drive Unlimited and *Tycoon City: New York* – both Atari games – have this month shown us two degrees of emancipation in the modern sandbox, each of which raises questions. Deep Red's inner-city project puts the building blocks and people of the Big Apple in the palm of your hand, but deprives you of ultimate control by dictating the base geography and road network. Eden's fetishist racer, in contrast, places no limits on where you drive your high-performance hardtop. Into a mass grave of other off-road adventurers? So be it. Into the path of other, more serious racers? That sounds possible.

There's no knowing until the game's release whether *Tycoon* will benefit or suffer because of its austerity. The same is true of *Unlimited* and its comparative leniency. We can't even say if Deep Red imagined the limits it imposed as part of its original design, or if they materialised in response to technical concerns or some other, maybe even political issue. But if the result is a game that actually focuses players on more rewarding tasks and protects them from an overabundance of possibility, then we have a dilemma. Just as Eden will want to think things over if *Unlimited* degenerates into a mess of unregulated exploration in which its love of the road ends up being overlooked.

If such libertarian concerns really start to take hold over tomorrow's games, then it'll be interesting seeing who leans to the right and who to the left. Who will choose to give us freedom *from* the activities that might impede our enjoyment, and who will instead give us freedom to find our own pleasure within these expansive new worlds?



34 **TOCA Race Driver 3**
PC, PS2, XBOX



36 **Tycoon City: New York**
PC



38 **Test Drive Unlimited**
360

39 **Tourist Trophy: The Real Riding Simulator**
PS2

40 **World Of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade**
MAC, PC



41 **The Outfit**
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42 **Metroid Prime: Hunters**
DS

42 **Seiken Densetsu**
DS, PS



44 **Lemmings**
PSP

44 **Resident Evil: Deadly Silence**
DS

46 **TimeShift**
360, PC, XBOX

46 **Driver: Parallel Lines**
PS2, XBOX

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 24**

TOCA Race Driver 3

Codemasters fires up the latest in its acclaimed series for the most realistic, most complete racing experience yet

Link-up and online multiplayer options (which now include qualifying sessions and customisable championships as well as arcade-style modes such as an eliminator round) are also offered









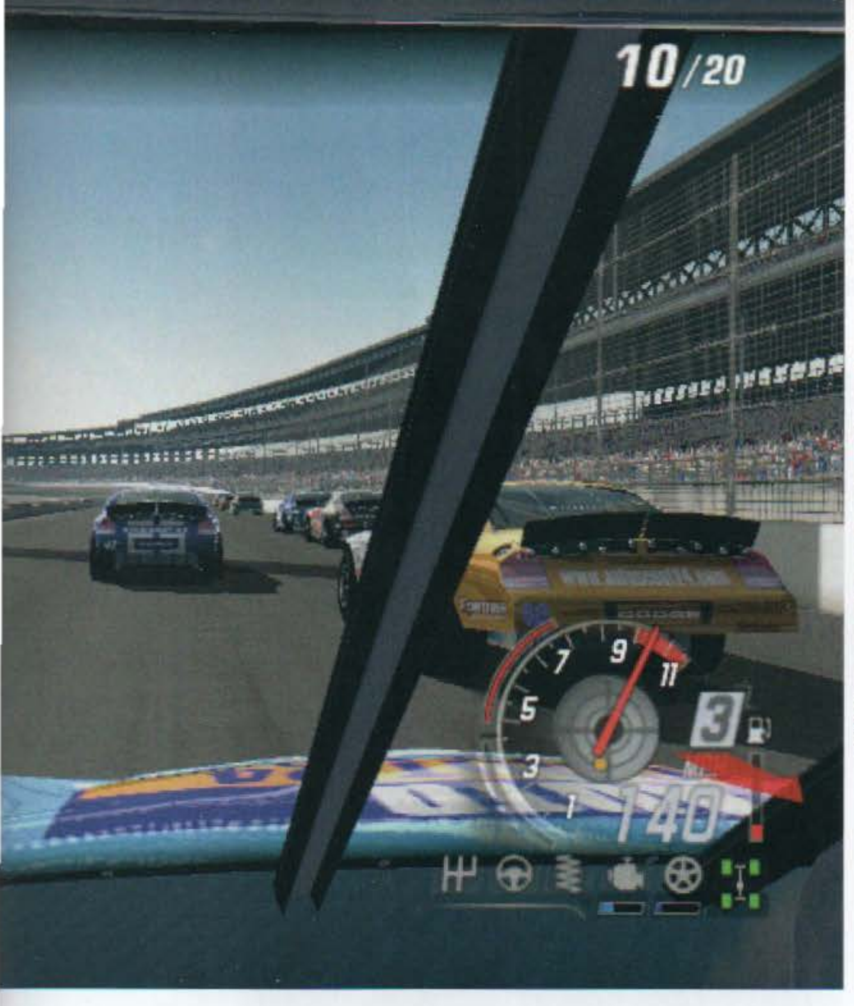
Nothing is as diverse: *Race Driver 3* offers over 70 real-world cars and 80 circuits catering for 35 or so categories of motorsport across 120 championships

Driving Jim Clark's Lotus 49 should feel scary. A ridiculously light and overpowered machine dating from before F1's safety-conscious era, only a fool would dare throw it around a circuit with reckless abandon (and only a very lucky fool would emerge from any such venture in anything other than the back of an ambulance). Somewhat fittingly, the most immediate way to convey what Codemasters has managed to achieve in the latest *TOCA* game is to jump in Clark's seat. You'll note the increase in graphical detail, of course, and you might even register the improvement in audio, but the overriding sensation will be one of danger. Driving a Lotus 49 in *Race Driver 3* feels perilous, like an accident waiting to happen. Not unlike the real thing, then.

Realism has always been the core of the *TOCA* experience, of course, but never on this level. The handling model has been thoroughly reconditioned to offer an additional degree of authenticity (particularly in Pro-Simulation mode which caters for the most demanding *TOCA* player) and while it may not currently deliver a thoroughly convincing recreation across all of the wide-ranging categories of motorsport on offer here (although nothing is as off the mark as the last outing's rally sections, for instance), in most cases it already feels extraordinarily close to the real thing.

Then there's the stricter adherence to the mechanisms of real-world motorsport. All of the categories feature the ability to get on to the track while sticking to individual rules and regulations (qualification procedure, use of marshal flags, penalties, etc) while elements such as fuel consumption, tyre temperature and wear also come into play. And anyone subscribing to the 'rubbing is racing' notion should be aware the damage system is now drastically enhanced – on top





of the usual gearbox, steering, suspension issues resulting from abusive driving, tyres also blow, wheel assemblies get ripped clear, bodywork deforms and wings get broken (both of which now have an effect on aerodynamics and handling), engines overheat and radiators explode.

The main benefit of the increased ability of the damage model is in the way it deepens the sense of involvement. Crashes in *Race Driver 3* matter not only because they can mean the immediate end of a hard-fought race but also because they feel real. You'll often catch yourself wincing just before impact and cursing yourself while you're sat inside your virtual wreck, realising the implication of your error.

Occasionally, it won't be your fault. The AI is also being tweaked to be more aggressive while remaining realistic. Opponents will defend their position with vigour but can only rely on the same rules applicable to the player, so if a car flies into a corner at excessive velocity it'll end up in the scenery – there are no magic levels of grip. In the current build, the AI is perhaps the least convincing element – too often, adversaries tiptoe around you – although this is still under development and there are nevertheless promising signs that the level of realism has evolved since the last iteration (in keeping with the nature of motorsport, crashes between AI cars are now more common).

The most obvious development this time around is the number of categories available. More than 35 are promised, split over six classes (open wheel, GT, touring car, oval, off-road/rally, historic) and distributed amongst 120 championships, themselves divided into World Tour (with far improved cutscenes) and Pro Career (which offers the chance to progress within a single class, eg touring car). It's a staggering offering, including every conceivable series from karting to F1 while also taking in less obvious examples such as ATV, monster truck, and, hell, even lawnmower racing.



Race Driver 3's new additions to the HUD include enhanced damage display settings as well as the now-obligatory G-force meter (only of practical benefit to onlookers)

There's no question, then, over the range of four-wheel-based experiences here: *TOCA Race Driver 3* is easily the most comprehensive racing game ever attempted. It also delivers one of the most driveable handling models to date and while the verdict on the quality of the racing itself will obviously have to wait until review time, all indications point to a superior affair over *Race Driver 2*. No small achievement when you consider that, when launched, that delivered arguably the best racing to be had on consoles.



Tick TOCA

A new addition to the *TOCA* world is the ability to upgrade your machinery. Not all categories allow tune-ups, but for those that do you are able to boost performance figures via improved induction kits, brakes, cams, clutches, ECUs, exhausts, intercoolers, roll cages, seats, strut braces and tyres, to name but a few. This is in addition to the standard car tuning, which lets you tweak a car's handling. As ever, you need only get involved as much as you wish to.

There's no question TOCA Race Driver 3 is easily the most comprehensive racing game ever attempted. It also delivers one of the most driveable handling models to date





For ultimate realism, select the Pro-Simulation mode, which increases the level of damage and other elements such as speed-sapping gravel traps

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP RED**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**

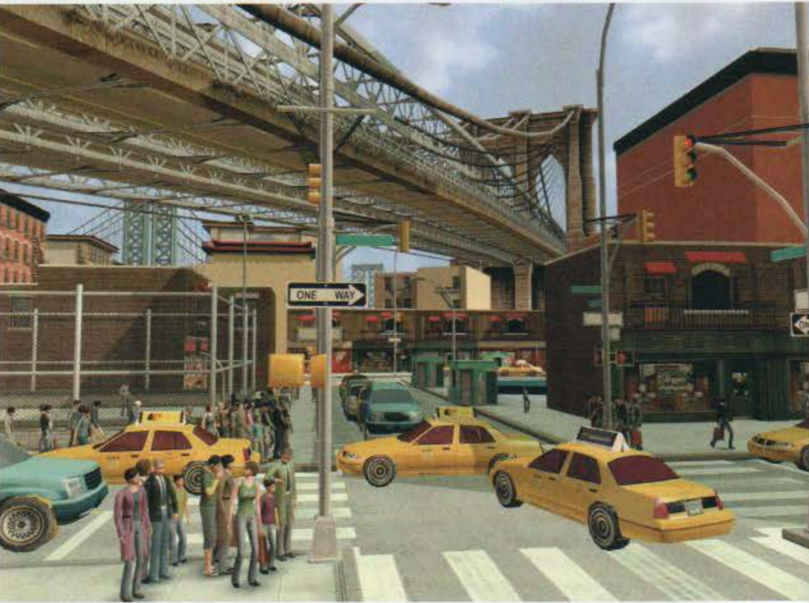
Tycoon City: New York

The little town blues are melting away for Deep Red's own project Gotham



Scale such as this can only be achieved through dynamic detail levels and a raft of slider options for more modest setups. Even a powerhouse PC will break a sweat when Manhattan's full skyline is crammed into frame





Famous landmarks represent milestones in your career as the Big Apple's foremost Renaissance man. As architect, mayor and citizen of this vast and eclectic city, you're bound to the real-world positions of its major landmarks and road network

It seldom seems to matter these days whether or not the game industry's technology is building worlds too complex for its games. Designs are drowned by details, ideas are pushed aside by economics, and the price of construction routinely undermines creativity. Except in the case of tycoon games, however, where the building of worlds *is* the design. *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3*, for example, has continued to demonstrate how both attention to intricate detail and a runaway sense of scale can combine to benefit the strategic model underneath. *Tycoon City* – a game that lets you rebuild New York from the first brick and upwards – is pushing that theory to its limits.

"It's a massive challenge," confirms Deep Red director **Clive Robert**. "We have to build a city with tens of thousands of buildings and populate it with 60,000 people. Every district is the equivalent of an entire map in *Rollercoaster*." Like that game, *City* instils in you the belief that every man, woman and child in its world *exists* for every second that you play. From an overview of your cosmopolitan domain, a flick of the mousewheel shuttles via a single unbroken zoom to street level, where cars back up behind traffic lights, pedestrians follow their dynamic itineraries, and life in the Big Apple continues as if viewed from a real-life window. That's no exaggeration, either, as anyone familiar with Atari's modern-day contributions to the genre will confirm.

But as much as it's hoped that players lose themselves in *Tycoon City*, its developer recognises that becoming too lost is now a significant possibility – here those minute details, if implemented without care, could be suffocating. Micromanagement has thus been purposefully reduced this time, with macromanagement becoming the game's new byword. Beginning with the bohemian Greenwich Park, the standard campaign expands to cover 12 major New York districts, each representing a self-contained world of non-linear objectives while at the same time staying open to the influence and people of its neighbours. The erection of famous landmarks is key to progress, and the adequate development of a particular district is recognised by a lovingly rendered reenactment of a real-world event such as the Chinese New Year or a Halloween parade. New Year's Eve in Times Square, we're told, is to be the game's definitive pat on the back.

"One of the risks, however," adds Robert, "is that you could ride roughshod through the whole game. We want to avoid that, and to encourage players to go back and attend to previous districts they thought they were





Customisation sounds like a less fulfilling alternative to full-blown creation, but just because the buildings and layout of the city are predefined doesn't mean you can't express yourself via the intricate details



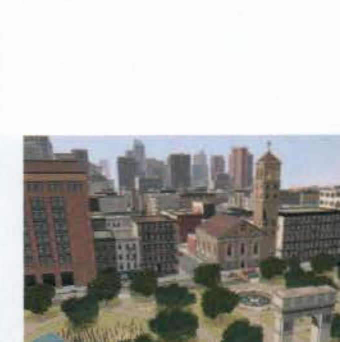


Big city lights need big crowds to give them life. Deep Red took to the streets of New York itself to ensure that the game's inhabitants suited their environment, recruiting local writers to pen their dialogue and locals generally to provide voices





Tycoon games must rank among the few that can sell their souls to advertisers without losing face. The streets of *Tycoon City* are lined with recognisable brands, and billboards can be thrown upon the sides of buildings to rake in game-world revenue. They can't be doing Deep Red much harm, either



City council

Catering to the local and even personal needs of a bustling metropolis is too great a task for the average campaign, which is why *Tycoon City* has drafted in an AI assistant to both work and compete with the player. Its behaviour in previous games, however, is not being tolerated. "We received tonnes of negative feedback regarding the aggressive AI in *Monopoly Tycoon*," reveals Robert. "People don't want that in these games, and so here the AI is collaborative, doing the stuff that you're not interested in, whatever that may be." Amusingly, as we're hearing this, the unattended and over-throttled background AI has already built a small kingdom of its own.

done with." To promote this, then, the game features a currency not only of cash, but of upgrade points that are cleverly metered out as the game progresses. Buildings can be evolved through a hierarchy of upgrade levels ranging from five to 50 depending on type, commanding in the process the player's attention even when the district concerned is theoretically complete. *Tycoon City* recognises that balanced beautification of neighbouring areas can have a cumulative effect on the emotions of their people, and as such expedites the required planning with a customary wealth of information windows, revealing in detail the wants, concerns and routines of everything from institutions to individuals.

We're given the tour of a New York the team built earlier, and it quickly becomes clear that the lovingly crafted, charmingly animated activities of its captivating streets are the sign of a genre that, unlike many, is in complete command of both its destiny and its technology. "More than anything," suggests Robert, "it's watching the people enjoying the stuff that you've built that makes this all worthwhile." He speaks over the corroborative sight of basketball courts filling with people, parks populated with rides and children, and shops selling wares of seemingly countless variety. Having given such character to its reams of statistics, *Tycoon* as a concept has hit a spot that can only grow sweeter as PCs further increase in processing power.

But that makes it sound too easy, and you can't help but recognise the enormous challenge this game represents. Predictably, the pre-polish, pre-optimisation build demonstrated chugs and grinds as if its host computer's video card were melting (it most probably is), and one look at the full zoomed out skyline of a fleshed-out, shadow-casting New York makes you fear for the experience of your own PC when release day comes around. Just what performance can the average PC owner expect at that time? "At this stage," Robert admits, "there's no knowing how the optimisation will pan out. We can adjust one tiny logic routine and find ourselves with a 20 per cent boost in framerate." Will 2Gb of RAM do the trick? "Let's just say that with that much memory you'd have a very good time."

One look at the full zoomed out skyline of a fleshed-out, shadow-casting New York makes you fear for the experience of your PC when release day comes around

Beneath that astounding facade, and in spite of our overall enthusiasm, we do have reservations that only proper hands-on testing can overcome. The construction of *Tycoon City*'s world is still your responsibility in terms of which buildings go where, how they look and what they offer, but it doesn't entirely feel like a place that, from a distance, you can look upon as your own. The city's road layout will always be fixed, and unless you're playing in Sandbox mode, so will the positions of its landmarks. Will this damage the player's vital sense of affiliation with the world they create? We shall see. Once the final product is in our hands, however, we'll hopefully be too busy building up to let such things get us down.



Though they characterise their home districts in both clothing and attitude, *Tycoon City*'s pedestrians will freely commute to places they find either interesting or memorable, and desert the places they don't





Layer upon layer of polished metal make up each of *Unlimited*'s cars. Take a walk around the back of an Aston Martin, for example, and you can eye its interior through the rear grill and see the rivets punched into its chassis



Test Drive Unlimited

Its open roads and wide world are ambitious, but it's the cars that remain the stars

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2006**

Freedom can be a dirty word in modern games, not least because of its devilish alter ego: monotony. It's a cruel irony that while streaming technology progresses to the point where virtual worlds can wholly justify that description, the demands of supporting elements such as textures and models increase to complicate their creation. But a distracting world isn't necessarily the chief requisite of a game that touts freedom to roam as its prime commodity; the mode by which you roam can provide an alternative just as alluring, as our time with *Unlimited* increasingly reveals.

We're encouraged during our hands-on to savour the opportunity to embrace the game's lack of boundaries and take to its rolling forests, but it's on tarmac where the weighty handling model excels. Flooring the accelerator is believably rare, and the full thrust of the engine provides compensatory pleasure. A leisurely drive ends at one of the game's many hubs – a base camp featuring a living room and garage for relaxed online trading, communications and avatar editing. This, we also discover, is the ideal spot for some automotive romance.

The two titles will happily coexist thanks to their differing ideals, but you could sit the production lines of *PGR3* next to those of *Unlimited* and watch Eden's cars get driven away every time – the superiority in terms of pure pornography is remarkable. Just as we were detecting a point of diminishing returns for next-gen car manufacture, here we find the immaculate modelling of high-performance machinery again providing a sensual hit. This isn't the first time the concept of ownership has been placed at the forefront of a racing game, but while the signature you can apply in titles such as *Forza* and *Gran Turismo* is comprised of tuning decisions and decals, here it's endemic in the sheer beauty of your ride.

With approximately four months until its suggested release, *Unlimited*'s 1,600km of Hawaiian streets do, however, add up to a world of fixes left to implement. While framerate will inevitably be improved, it's still unknown whether the team is aiming for 30 or 60fps (it currently dances between and often below). We've known for a while that the damage model will only affect AI traffic and not the pristine engines reserved for players, but it's the behaviour of cars while they're crashing that now worries us more than how they look afterwards. Collisions in the current build have much in common with those of *Double-STEAL*, vehicles floating high into the air when struck with sufficient force – surely this can't be the intention.

Once *Unlimited*'s final layer of polish (set to comprise HDR lighting and various post-processing effects) is applied, the game will look incredible. Perhaps not in the same painstakingly authentic manner as *PGR3*, but in various other ways that are nonetheless entirely (and arguably more) appropriate to a driving game. Its online functionality again promises something different yet equally exciting, making this something of an irresistible prospect for racing fans.

360's initial catalogue of visual tricks has been used to the full. Scenery blurs as you flick the camera to and fro, while every tree and signpost casts a realtime shadow across the multi-layered tarmac, reflected in passing cars



Hawaii 3-6-0

Repetitive though it often seems, *Unlimited*'s depiction of Hawaii succeeds as a playground rather than a sightseeing tour. So readable and reliable are the GPS and world maps that the mere act of navigation becomes uncommonly enjoyable. In fact, the game has you firmly in its grasp before you've even begun to communicate with its online population, enjoy its 200 offline objectives or plot race courses through its streets. An in-car radio connects seamlessly to 360's custom soundtrack library, electric windows alter engine noise as they're raised and a photo mode – admittedly inferior to that of *PGR3* – opens the door to hours of passive distraction. Rarely has a game achieved so much through details rather than core design.

Hawaii can be a somewhat repetitious environment despite its idyllic climes, but fantastical *Ridge Racer*-style tours aren't a part of this game's design. *Unlimited* offers reality as its playground, and freedom of movement as prime distraction





Bizarrely, front-on impacts appear to be unable to project the rider forward over the bike's handlebars. The game's other crashes, when they occur, are wincingly realistic



The visual detail that's applied to the *Gran Turismo* series is again evident in beautifully recreated two-wheeled selection. A fourplayer versus mode is currently offered, and *GT4*'s photo mode makes a reappearance

Tourist Trophy: The Real Riding Simulator

Polyphony parks the cars, dons the leathers and comes out to play on bikes instead

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **POLYPHONY DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER**

Although they have two fewer wheels than cars, motorbikes are twice as hard to portray convincingly in virtual form. Much of the complexity comes from the rider's direct physical input and the intricate effect this places on a bike's handling dynamic – recreating this successfully becomes a considerable challenge, and one that only a handful of biking titles have managed in gaming's 30-odd years.

The historically low success rate wouldn't appear to phase Polyphony. The developer recently used the Tokyo Motor Show to officially unveil its new racing game to the broader public after a previous debut outing at TGS. A racing title from Polyphony is always going to suffer from obvious comparisons, and aside from borrowing the game engine, *Tourist Trophy* inevitably still adopts much of the *Gran Turismo* blueprint. The game is split between arcade- and career-based halves and between them you face a number of licences to obtain and over 80 bikes to unlock and race on the game's current count of 35 circuits (a significant number of which *GT4* players will recognise). Naturally, an in-depth upgrade system is in place, as well as the ability to customise your rider's safety gear with real-world examples from major manufacturers.

As you might expect, the level of realism is a fundamental aspect of the *Tourist Trophy* experience. Independent front and rear brakes are a given, but additional elements such as the ability to bring the rider's chest down to the petrol tank for drag-free high speed, and to select one of three preset 'riding forms' which affect the bike's centre of gravity (or fine tune up to eight parameters such as seating position, waist offset and knee/arm angles in the main Tourist Trophy World mode) allow you to set up the bike to best suit your riding technique.

The riding itself is commendably implemented at this stage although, like *GT* and car driving, knowledge of bike riding fundamentals is necessary in order to begin exploiting *TT*'s rewarding characteristics. The sense of speed, even onboard, isn't as convincing, however, and the high level of detail required for both rider and bike appears to have currently capped the number of their simultaneous onscreen presence at just four.

Still, there's some road left to travel before release and therefore time for further tweaking. For now, though, the one thing we can say with certainty is that *TT* conforms to the notion of biking videogames being trickier to pin down than their car-focused equivalents.



As you'd expect, the majority of bikes are of Japanese heritage, although models from European manufacturers such as BMW are expected to make an appearance. A range of 20 sets of leathers and 50 helmets is available for your rider



Tourist attraction

***Tourist Trophy* is being created under the direction of Takamasa Shichisawa, a man as passionate about two-wheeled machinery as Polyphony head Kazunori Yamauchi is about cars. Yamauchi is overseeing as producer, but admits his knowledge of two wheels is limited and so is leaving the meat of the game to Shichisawa, who has been racing bikes at clubman level for a decade and who apparently first suggested the idea of *Tourist Trophy* to his superior.**





Early rumours pegged the Blood Elves and Pandaren (an in-joke race of bushido panda popular enough to enter canon) as new races, but the Alliance race still remains unknown

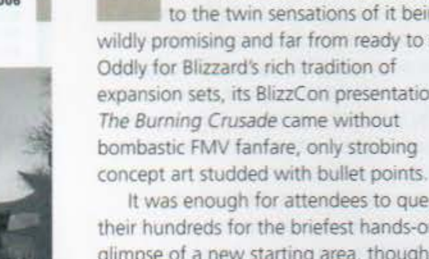


Decadent and magic-crazed, the Blood Elves' place in the Horde fits the lore, but also gives players a conventionally attractive Horde race

World Of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade

More world, more war and even more crafting as Blizzard's first MMO expansion covers all its bases

FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2006**



Crusade revisits existing inaccessible areas – such as the citadel of Karazhan, set to host *WOW*'s largest, most intricate dungeon yet. It won't require a 40-player raid, though it will likely be top-level

Is it fitting that *World Of WarCraft*'s first expansion should be announced to the twin sensations of it being wildly promising and far from ready to show? Oddly for Blizzard's rich tradition of expansion sets, its BlizzCon presentation of *The Burning Crusade* came without bombastic FMV fanfare, only strobing concept art studded with bullet points.

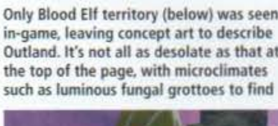
It was enough for attendees to queue in their hundreds for the briefest hands-on glimpse of a new starting area, though; the equivalent in-game crowds swamping placeholder NPCs or battering themselves against the invisible walls that hemmed them in (cruelly, in sight of the Blood Elf capital's gilded minarets). So *Crusade* remains an idea: and that idea, as the title suggests, is a march to war. Rather than offering a lush new world, the expansion moves into the old battlefields of previous *WarCraft* games, on the other side of the title screen's portal. Shattered islands bobbing in an arcane storm, Outland's vistas tantalise, but may come at a heavy price. VP of creative development **Chris Metzen** frequently likens it to the wild west – lawless badlands where Alliance and Horde tensions go unchecked.

"It ain't called *WarCraft* for nothing," he smiles. "We knew from the beginning that we wanted the factions to be meaningful ideas in the world, with conflict and social competition. We want to ramp that up with the expansion, really get people rallying to the cause." While much of Outland will be high-level areas – the expansion also raises the maximum height to 70 – it seems unlikely players will leave their rivalries at the Dark Portal when they return.

Producer **Shane Dabiri** maintains a somewhat romantic view of *WOW* conflict: "When I lose a fight, they'll salute me, or bow, or..." Spit? we offer helpfully. "Or spit. I've actually had paladins spit on me – I don't know what that says about honour."

Players who prefer not to contribute to the escalating hostilities – though a swathe of new Battlegrounds will feature, at least one actually affecting faction ownership of Outland areas – can get to work crafting new socketed equipment, ready to fit with enchanted gems. These can be looted, or created through the new item-manufacturing profession, Jewelcrafting, which may start its own civil wars with the currently lucrative Enchanting trade.

But *Crusade*'s most important features are unpredictable, and number in their millions: more than any product Blizzard has made to date, this is as much social engineering as expansion, the first twist in years of planned upheaval and reformation. Just don't ask when to expect it. "I think the only thing we've ever shipped on time is BlizzCon," muses Dabiri.



Only Blood Elf territory (below) was seen in-game, leaving concept art to describe Outland. It's not all as desolate as that at the top of the page, with microclimates such as luminous fungal grottoes to find





Laying down the lore

WOW's players have forced some compromises between canon and gameplay – inter-faction communication was removed during beta due to the weight of harassment complaints it generated. "It was a madhouse," Metzen sighs. Does he feel that *WarCraft* lore can complement the day-to-day concerns of newcomers to the fold? "As the story guy, I really value putting in that kind of stuff, but there was a big question mark above it – pardon the pun – because I didn't know if anyone would care," he says. "I remember playing a Tauren druid, and up on the Elder Rise are tapestries about the birth of the Tauren – I'd just written them a week before we shipped. We put it in for kicks, and while I was training up I saw: 'Hey, has anyone seen these things in the tent up here?' And people started to trickle in, read them and talk about it, with me listening to it become part of their game experience. I almost had tears in my eyes: it's been tremendously rewarding to see people respond to the world's richness."







The Outfit

Relic brings a fresh pair of field-glasses to the console wargame, and opts to call in reinforcements

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **RELIC STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2006**

Homeworld creator Relic's expertise is firmly in the field of PC realtime strategy, and that, according to lead designer **Jeff Brown**, is exactly how its console debut started out: "About 80 per cent strategy, 20 per cent action." That is most definitely not how it will end up, however. *The Outfit* is shaping up to be a rambunctious, free-spirited tactical-action rampage that flicks away conventions – including the grimy, sombre treatment of World War II that is recent fashion – like cigar ash from the front of a flak jacket.

To call it squad-based would be slightly misleading. Though the lead character can be accompanied by up to four grunts at a time, and the team issued orders (attack, suppressing fire and two character-specific commands) via the D-pad, they are relatively ineffective in action. Relative, that is, to *The Outfit*'s true selling point, which Relic is calling Destruction on Demand. This allows Field Unit points (cheekily known as FUs) won in battle to be traded in for instantaneous air-drops of squad reinforcements, military hardware or even air and artillery bombardment.

Vehicles, from jeeps through armoured half-tracks to Sherman tanks, are the immediate and gratifying (in their firepower, if not their rather weightless handling) choice. But smart selection and positioning of gun emplacements, and the soldiers to man them, will be vital to assaulting and defending key positions. The tactical freedom is tremendous, and is further trebled by the choice between three squad commanders, all comically hard-bitten, all with well-balanced but strongly personalised weapon-sets (anti-personnel, anti-vehicle and stealth). They can be switched between freely upon death, and this, combined with the game's fast pace and refusal to punish failure on any level, encourages a carefree, trial-and-error approach to the thunderous skirmishing.

As well as the US Army rides available via air-drop, absolutely any vehicle on the map can be commandeered, including, as you might expect, farm trucks, staff cars and German armour. Less foreseeable were the driveable tractors, wheelbarrows and – yes – steam trains

Sitting somewhere on the strategic scale between *Freedom Fighters* and *Battalion Wars*, *The Outfit* plays first and foremost as a solid, supple and impressively pyrotechnic, if hardly refined, shooter. Its true tactical nous will only be revealed in the fullness of its 12 (so far encouragingly non-linear) campaign maps, and in its potentially sensational, but as-yet-unseen multiplayer mode (see 'Ungentlemanly outfitters'). There's a concern that its huge concessions to accessibility and flexibility will make it possible to bludgeon your way through the game without ever really getting to grips with it; or conversely, that Relic will only be able to dig depth and focus out of the action by imposing harsh curbs on its liberal ruleset, robbing it of its spirit. Even if that's the case, however, it will have succeeded in sneaking an original, light-hearted twist into the overbearing militarism that defines the 360's announced line-up, and this early in the console's life that can be counted as a moral victory.



The physical destruction is not quite as convincing as you might expect from 360, with walls blowing away in neat sections and buildings collapsing tidily in on themselves. However, the impermanence of cover is a striking threat



Ungentlemanly outfitters

Multiplayer will consist of a dozen bespoke maps, support eight players over Live with twoplayer on- and offline coop and feature three Axis squad commanders to face off against the Outfit trio. Brown promises objective-based modes in the style of *Battlefield*, made more hectic and unpredictable by Destruction on Demand and the mutable maps, which might be populated by 100 AI soldiers plus the players. Motor pools, armouries and radio masts – bases that expand the range of units available – look to be crucial. Brown has already declared himself an addict, and producer Adrian Crook is confident it will be the best Live experience anywhere when it launches.

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **RETRO STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Metroid Prime Hunters

A rare glimpse of Samus' singleplayer impresses – but leaves us with as many questions as answers





The manual, almost mouse and keyboard-like system of the stylus-driven control is better suited to the multiplayer arena – where skill and accuracy become more important to play than accessibility

The DS's chance to puff its chest out and strut, peacock-proud – *Hunters* doesn't waste the opportunity. The intro and mid-level cutscenes, while undoubtedly superficial, are undeniably attractive. Likewise, the now-familiar opening – Samus emerging from her ship and the camera settling into *Prime*'s firstperson viewpoint – is a far cry from the simple touchscreen curiosities we've so far grown accustomed to.

Samus' initial contract – an artefact hunt that paves the way to a final boss encounter – shows that, technically, there's much to admire and little to criticise. Detail is high, and on the DS's small screens does a fine job of emulating the orange-lit corridors and neon-blue terminals of *Prime*'s spacestation tutorial. Conversely, the glittering corridor leading to the demo's finale proves the DS is just as capable of soft and organic as it is hard and industrial.

But there are concerns here – primarily with control. You're presented with four methods: move using D-pad or buttons and aim with the touchscreen, or, if you prefer, movement and aim can be assigned to both pad and face buttons, while the touchscreen toggles between visors and weapons and accesses the morphball. Four choices that (for the ambidextrous) can be distilled to two – accuracy or comfort. Aiming with the touchscreen, while offering plenty of sensitivity and a high level of accuracy, really takes its toll on the index finger charged with firing. It's a problem less pronounced with the alternative method but, as a mid-level boss encounter soon demonstrates, the vagaries of aiming with face buttons makes connecting with the enemy prolonged and clumsy – something that's confounded further by platforming with near-*Turok* levels of frustration.



Even now, *Hunters*' singleplayer experience is something of an unknown quantity. Will it be mission-based as the most recent demo suggests (the opening scene in the current demo has Samus being contracted for a specific artefact hunt) or is this just a precursor to the more traditional free-roaming fare of previous instalments?

Regardless, *Hunters*' confident execution suggests the handheld is more than capable of flexing its muscle with an FPS – and the inclusion of wi-fi multiplayer is sure to prove the point.

Seiken Densetsu

The world's best threeplayer RPG gets a two-screen makeover and a 3D update

FORMAT: **DS, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**



The PS2 version's life and magic guages are already fuelling speculation on how the game might play, but it's clear from the roaming rabites that the basics, at least, are already covered

The SNES did many things well, but for fans of Japanese RPGs it will long remain a particularly cherished machine. And, as a consequence, Square will long remain a particularly cherished company. For all the charms of *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy* and *Super Mario RPG*, for many the most cherished memories of all were the threeplayer adventures of *Seiken Densetsu 2*, or *Secret Of Mana* in the west.

It's a series whose profile has slipped of late (despite a recent re-release of the original Game Boy game on the GBA), but that's about to be rectified with new titles on both DS and PS2. The DS is the obvious inheritor of the SNES classic's style, but visually it perhaps owes a little more to the more sophisticated *Seiken Densetsu 3* than the cute charm of its predecessor. The game will feature, unsurprisingly, three heroes, who – in a rather naked nod to *Zelda* – will each be able to use a sword, a bow and a hook to fight and navigate through the world. Use of the touchscreen will mostly be reserved for navigating the game's menus, which will hopefully prove as fluid as those in *Secret of Mana*, but it will also be required for some gameplay sequences.



The prospect of seeing the second game's colourful charm allied with the detailed flair of the third makes the DS version a hugely desirable handheld experience

More of a departure is the fully 3D PS2 version. Very little is known about this yet, but it's clear that it shares the same distinctive universe as *Secret Of Mana* itself. As ever, it's impossible to be certain how well the game's mechanics will translate to a full 3D world, but if Square Enix pulls both off games, they could help return the firm to the top of the action-RPG tree.

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM 17**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Lemmings

They walk a familiar walk and talk a familiar talk, but will an unexpected pitfall result in last-minute tragedy?





The promising Create mode feels cumbersome, its tools seldom creating more than a pale imitation of the game's levels. It isn't immediately disheartening, as the mode clearly wasn't finished in our preview code

Lemmings on PSP is such a seamless uptake that, when its titular airheads drop from a trapdoor that first opened in 1991, you'll think they've been marching over hill and dale (and lava, sand, moon rock and swirling blades) ever since. The combination of delicate visual makeover and newly tailored control system does nothing to undermine the character of DMA's original design. Still, there's a charm to these creatures' enigmatic yet robotic march, just as there's euphoria in their leap towards the blue skies of safety and heartbreak in their stride towards your genocidal mistakes. The alternation of relaxed containment and perilous freedom still, with one possible exception, churns the action and maintains balance. Vitally, Team 17 has dedicated itself to portability with the changes it's made.

Changes such as rendering the game using both 3D background models and 2D sprites create a functional look that doesn't let its hardware go to waste. The analogue nub pans the camera while the D-pad moves the cursor; Circle toggles two levels of zoom, Square accelerates time, and the shoulder buttons browse the available actions. The time it takes to settle into the new system can't be more than five minutes, yet it does pretty much everything that a PSP adaptation demands. And speaking of time: pressing Start in *Lemmings* imposes a traditional pause, only this time it lets you allocate tasks *while* the clock is frozen.

Which is where that caveat resurfaces, and a nation of fans cry "Oh no!" before clutching their heads for fear of explosion. Clearly a concession to the fixed cursor speed, this is the kind of violent change that could prove no less ruinous than the problem it's trying to solve. As immediately beguiling as it is, you have to wonder when, if at all, *Lemmings*' two modes, four difficulty settings and 100+ levels will succumb to this rogue element.





Don't let the 3D engine deceive you. *Lemmings* is a great capture of bygone days, its characters and systems cracked from the amber and taught some new tricks



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

Resident Evil: Deadly Silence

Another REmake, but this time one in which you can reach out and touch the zombies

"What is it...? What *IS* it?" Barry Burton – still struggling with what passes for acceptable voice acting – hopes it "isn't Chris's blood." Anyone who's had to uncurl their toes from the horror of this opening scene will know exactly what it is – a direct port of the PlayStation original.

This is partly true. *Deadly Silence* does contain a Classic mode – an exact replica of the original, complete with its unintentionally amusing dialogue and horrendous intro. The transition to the DS, however, isn't particularly funny. The handling of the original's FMV, for example – with the DS resizing scenes in a messy patchwork of grainy fullscreen and badly compressed black-framed footage – suggests it's a long way from being optimised for the hardware.

The problems aren't confined to video, either. Returning to the unwieldy combination of fixed camera and rotational control is one thing. Adjusting to it on a substantially smaller screen and confidently aiming at an approaching zombie from the extremities of the current view is another entirely. It's difficult not to feel disappointed.

Rebirth – *Deadly Silence*'s rearranged version of the original – does at least offer some hope. It promises a more action-oriented reworking, with new puzzles, a less stringent approach to ammunition and the opportunity to slash at approaching zombies with the stylus. But the latter issue causes some concern. Standing alone, the zombies offer a pleasantly tactile approach to killing, but the way you encounter them is inconsistent – with some rooms automatically changing to the new perspective while others do not – and the drastic difference in appearance to the rest of Rebirth's presentation is too jarring. Capcom, then, still has its work cut out if it's going to convert this rather frightening early code into its usual high DS standards.



Tasks and puzzles tailored specifically for the DS's touchscreen should provide *Resident Evil*'s old hands with new challenges. Whether or not they'll prove incentive enough for the more cynical to revisit the mansion is another issue



Both cooperative and competitive modes will be included, the latter of which seeing up to four players in a race to accumulate the most points – where the bigger the kill, the higher the reward

FORMAT: **360, PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **SABER INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **US/RUSSIA**
RELEASE: **Q2 2006 (360), Q3 2006 (PC, XBOX)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E147**

TimeShift

Months go by but it draws no nearer. Just what is happening with Saber's shooter?





The design (or should that be overdesign?) of *TimeShift*'s arsenal is one of the game's more unusual aspects. Though the alternative fire options are interesting and worthwhile, just how many elaborate mechanised appendages do such weapons need to produce them?

Time shifting – the act of freezing, reversing and accelerating time – is something Saber Interactive may have been better developing in real life before introducing it to the overcrowded world of the firstperson shooter. A trip to the future, for instance, may have foreseen the emergence of 360 as chief development platform and at least trimmed a few weeks off a projected six-month delay. Likewise, before demonstrating the pre-beta title at Atari's headquarters this month, a trip to the recent past would have rekindled valuable memories of *Perfect Dark Zero*'s ill-advised early screens, suggestive as they were of a game decorated with cheap technical tricks and lacklustre art.

But just as we've since discovered that Rare's game was thereby misrepresented, so it's likely that *TimeShift* will emerge a better production than this latest glimpse suggests. Saber's rhetoric has become more aggressive since the announcement of the delay, now focusing on not only what its game provides, but also on what other games don't. Yet the manner in which the particulars of time shifting are shown here – detached from the overall flow of the game and seemingly trivia in application – is revealing. We see enemies frozen in time and blasted (with no visual feedback yet in place) into an altered but limply followed trajectory, barrels ridden as they fly from an explosion, gibbed bodies suspended in stasis, and weapons snatched from their owners' halted hands. Again and again, we're shown these same things.

But we have to ask: is there anyone who's genuinely expected to play the game this way? Are these relevant emergent tactics at play or little more than trailer-friendly scraps of action bereft of supportive context or inherent appeal? Fortunately, the answer we're given to that is a more natural demonstration of the game in motion. When allowed to settle into a fluent pattern of play, *TimeShift*'s manipulations of the clock are suddenly more versatile, exciting and, crucially, promising. But which is it to be? Which of these two experiences accurately demonstrates where *TimeShift*'s heart lies? If only we could leap forward to the spring to find out for ourselves.

Driver: Parallel Lines

A crashed game is easily reset, but can the same be said for a series?

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **REFLECTIONS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2006**



Control over *Driver*'s vehicles has been markedly improved since last time, while the framing of action in cinematic slo-mo has been more seamlessly integrated

One read of the fourth *Driver*'s adopted title suggests more than just narrative severance – conflicting desires for distance and association, perhaps. For someone who'd never even encountered *Driver 3*, the talk of back-to-basics design in this instalment should be more than enough background information. But for all the talk of post-mortems and reconstruction, the series still chases its base ambitions with unabated zest. Now wedged between its former self and *GTA* (the respective developers' times at Psygnosis having left, it seems, a subconscious connection), *Driver* remains determined to carve itself a niche in the hip underworld of Martin Scorcese land. To its credit, the new game's FMV cutscenes do an excellent job of unashamedly slamming together every gangster convention from cinema's last 30 years.

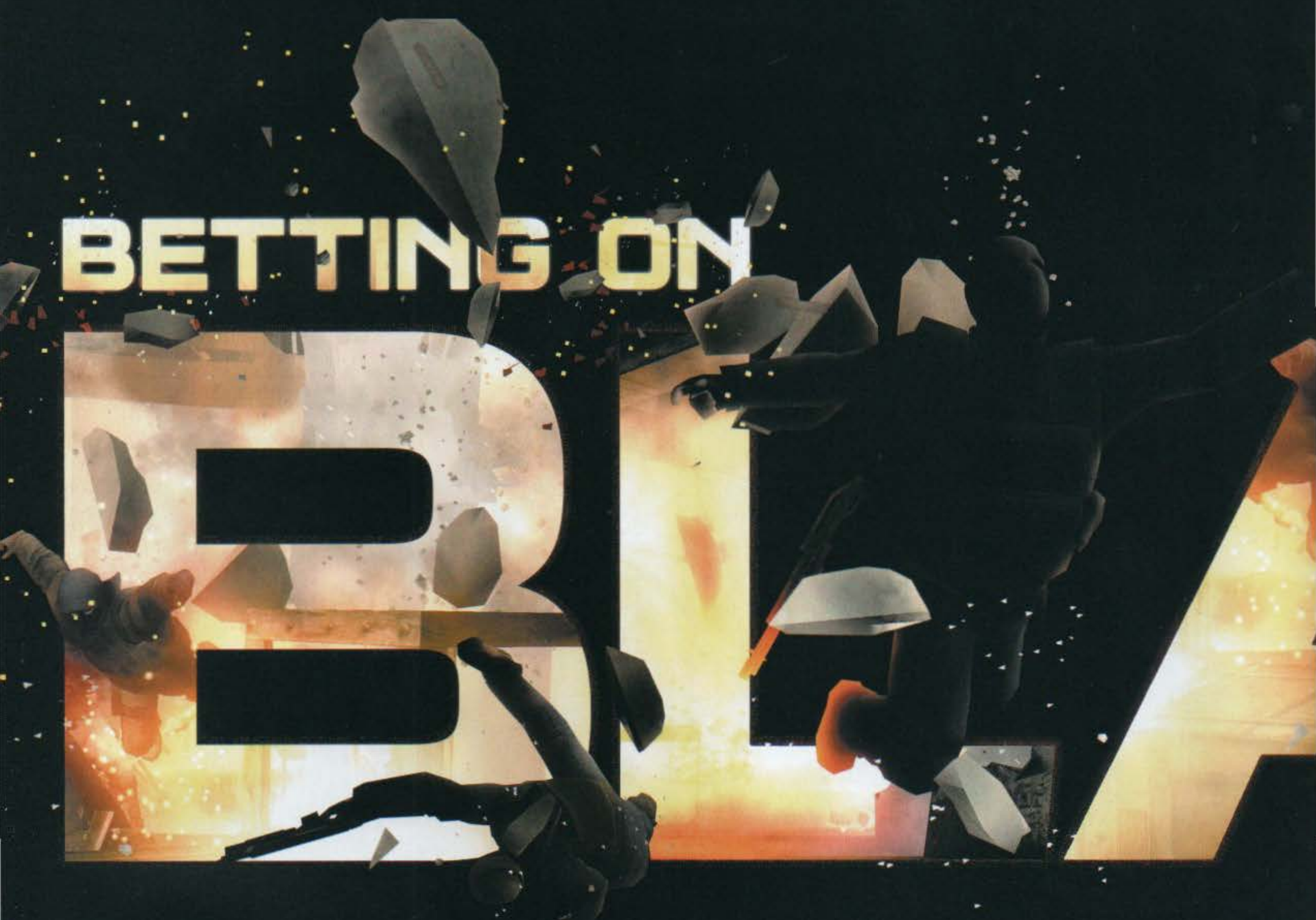
Behind the wheel, *Parallel Lines* is a definite improvement, even if it's more an undignified retreat than a confident departure. This is the first *Driver* as imagined by the second PlayStation – far from a direct remake but still a willing slave of its basic design. On-foot play still exists, but primarily as a means of getting from your last write-off to your next unbroken ride. The new antihero – a predictably reckless kid with suitably rebellious hair – runs to and fro with an expressive stride that speaks well of the game's character, even if allied NPCs take their own motion-captured steps a little too charismatically. The vehicles, conversely, exhibit a greater sense of control and thus game's most welcome adjustment.

Interpreted rather than meticulously mapped, the New York streets present a less predictable gauntlet than before, as obstacles abound and density of traffic dictates difficulty. This means that when cars and bikes are shown to weave through tight alleyways and busy roads with considerable dexterity, you at least know that the game is doing something right. Its missions (many said to be optional minigames) will have just as much to say about the overall quality of experience and, it must be said, currently resemble a mixed bag, but at least *Parallel Lines* should pass its MOT.





Early word suggested that *Parallel Lines* would adopt a more stylised look, but realistic textures hang from its geometry making the overall aesthetic a faithful one



Every bullet counts and every kill accumulates – but can Criterion replicate its Burnout success in the most crowded genre of all?

Guildford-based developer Criterion was a little surprised when Shigeru Miyamoto asked if he could see *Black* at this year's E3. Demonstrated behind closed doors, this firstperson shooter was hardly supported by the usual EA razzmatazz, but word of mouth can be an influential thing. Flanked by an entourage of Nintendo staff, Miyamoto sat down before being assaulted by the game's distinct blend of destruction, noise and gun porn. And his response after it was all over? A gentle nod of the head. Probably not a Revolution launch title, then.

Black is pure, unadulterated Hollywood. Dissatisfied with shooters that felt heartless and clinical, Criterion's mission was to inject the



genre with a sense of drama, a sense of peril, a sense that bullets actually hurt. And not just to enemies that pop up out of their cover positions to show off mocap and ragdoll animation, but to the environments too. "Every bullet is our baby," confirms *Black*'s product manager, **Dean Evans**. "They all have a destination. Fire a bullet at the ground and you will see every one of them kicking up dirt or debris. Hit a signpost and parts of it will start to collapse. Each bullet can ricochet – you can even bounce bullets off walls to hit enemies. The environment is as much your ally as the gun you're holding."

And it doesn't take long into one of *Black*'s two playable levels to understand what Evans is getting at. There's a satisfaction from firing

Animation is excellent, and foes respond exaggeratedly to hits in key locations. They take a lot of bullets, too, adding to the OTT John Woo vibe

these weapons that's unequalled in any FPS in recent memory. The location is eastern Europe, your typical urban city streets full of crumbling buildings and boxy cars. But though the setting may be less then inspiring, the action is intense, jarring and unwavering. Doors are blown open with shotgun blasts, enemies jig like epileptic marionettes and cars crumple, smoke and then explode with scene-stirring authenticity.

After evolving the racing genre in a fresh direction with the *Burnout* series, Criterion wanted to do much the same thing with the FPS. "We took a look at what was out there and we realised that no one had properly recreated the sensation of firing a gun," explains Evans. "Developers were taking the genre in odd directions. Introducing stealth, squad commands, vehicles. The people at Bungie have a lot to answer for," he adds with mock contempt.

But it's true: *Black* has no distractions, no gimmicks, and no extra 'features' to please the marketing department. The fact that it's focused solely on the destructive nature of ammo is paying dividends. It won't surprise you to learn that the original prototype of *Black* was nothing more than one room and a large gun. When test players responded positively to the feedback and thrill they were getting from merely shooting one weapon in a single room the team knew they could be on to something special.

"We wanted to get across the adrenaline rush you'd feel in a firefight situation," continues Evans. "You're hiding down behind a car and you cannot only hear but see the effect bullets are having on your cover. It has to be absolutely terrifying – sparks, glass and rubble flying everywhere." He reels off the Hollywood movies that have inspired the team: True Lies, Predator, Terminator 2, Die Hard.

Such comparisons are classic developer talk, of course, but for a change there's substance to the claims. Heat is Evans' best example, pointing out that the weapons in Mann's classic heist movie sound nothing like the real thing. Black takes the Hollywood approach, enhancing and exaggerating the experience. Where most developers record weapons down at the firing range, Criterion employ movie sound engineers to ramp up the SFX using anything from slabs of ham to exploding Coke cans. The resulting effect is a cacophony of destruction that assaults the ears and frays the nerves.

If we were to give you a blow-by-blow walkthrough of the City Streets level it wouldn't sound particularly engrossing. Men appear in windows, *Time Crisis*-style, begging to be shot at, cars are strategically placed to offer you



We haven't yet played it, but *Black* has a bridge level that requires you to progress forward inch by inch. And there won't be any tanks to aid you

CHALLENGE EVERYTHING

EA's influence can be found everywhere in the game, but not to any noticeably antiseptic effect. Achievements flash up onscreen if you complete special kills or prove to be a particularly competent marksman and though the level of bonus-chasing is more sedate than it is in *Battlefield 2: Modern Combat* it's still hard to shake the feeling that it's overproduced. The inclusion of blood was never an option (to allow the game to reach a wider audience in key territories) but there's still a healthy helping of feedback, with enemies jigging exaggeratedly under rapid fire. Criterion also deserves credit for not tacking on a lame multiplayer mode: *Black* is singleplayer only and may be much the better for it.



There's a plentiful supply of enemies on each level and it's encouraging to see that corpses don't simply vanish – at least not until you've moved on

TITLE: **BLACK**
FORMAT: **XBOX, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRITERION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2006**


Not since *Rampage* has the demolition of buildings been so satisfying. Falling masonry crushes anyone beneath and while some of the more obvious weak points are set up it's likely that you'll be finding fresh ways to pulp enemies second and third time through

cover, but usually end up as bullet fodder. And from this evidence the levels seem streamlined, offering little in the way of exploratory options. A city street with a minor detour would be more accurate. But then *Black* is not trying to be *Deus Ex* and what is does well, it does magnificently.

Although *Black*'s AI appears adequate rather than inspired, the game does have a certain spontaneity and emergent possibilities, mostly produced through the potency of the weapons and the manner in which they chew up the scenery. It's possible, for instance, to charge through the level picking off enemies with accurate headshots or brutalising them with automatic fire, but to ignore the advantages gained through causing masonry to fall, floors to collapse or your bullets to bounce off corrugated iron is to miss what *Black* is all about.

This is exemplified more assuredly in the second playable section. A homage to The Matrix, the Asylum level sees you descending a staircase before walking into a large room with, yes, a collection of large stone pillars standing there waiting to be resculpted into apple cores. Enemies rush from doorways, only this time some carry riot shields impervious to bullets. Tactics need to be adjusted and, while it doesn't require a strenuous leap of the imagination, the move from shooting enemies directly to killing them with an avalanche of stone is an immensely satisfying one.

After the room has been cleared of the bad guys and the bullets have stopped flying there comes a notable period of eerie quiet. It's what Evans refers to as 'thick air'. "How many Matrix-style games have there been?" he asks rhetorically. "Not one of them has replicated that lobby scene. After you've indulged in carnage and destruction we wanted the air to hang heavy, for there to be this lull where you take in the damage and see what your weapons have done."

"After you've engaged in carnage and destruction, we wanted there to be this lull where you take in the damage and see what your weapons have done"

The 'thick air' principle is aided by some beautiful lighting and particle effects – launch a grenade into an upper-story window and you see it smashing a small hole through the pane. A couple of seconds later and an explosion rips through the entire building, glass shattering not just from the room you've targeted but also from windows in the storeys below. Shards fall and smoke billows ostentatiously, adding to the sense that you're some kind of one-man demolition machine.

But if that makes *Black* appear easy and throwaway, it's anything but. Criterion has gone for the now classic two-weapon slot and rechargeable energy approach to self-defence




The weapons dropped by dead foes can be retrieved and turned against them, though you'll only be able to carry two at any one time. Ammo is also generously distributed, encouraging players to let loose at anything that moves with little regard for their clips


You have three health bars that replenish whenever cover is found and hits avoided. Lose an entire health bar, however, and it can't be replaced until you find a medipack. Surrounding your efforts to stay alive are some truly magnificent lighting and particle effects

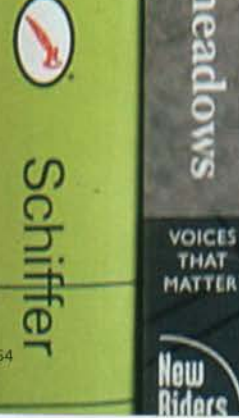
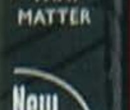
(clearly the company is happy to steal a few ideas from Bungie when appropriate). And you always feel vulnerable simply because what works for you also works for the enemy. When you hear the sound of a minigun spitting out bullets in your vicinity, your first reaction is flight rather than fight.

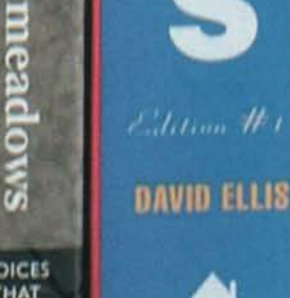
If there's one gnawing doubt about *Black* it's that it could turn into something of a duckshoot. While enemy weapons can be deadly there are few signs that we're going to be treated to intelligent foes that flank, coordinate and regroup. The sense that they're mere fodder for your bullets is underlined by their inability to react convincingly to grenades thrown in their direction – though this issue may be addressed before final release.

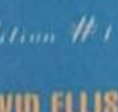
In terms of the backstory there are scant details available – all we're told is that the hero's name is Jack Kellar, that he's working for a covert military organisation and that he must bring a US traitor to justice. Covering around ten locations, each with three distinct 'beats' or sections, *Black* is said by Criterion to be the kind of game you'll complete relatively quickly – the fun, apparently, will come via going through the game a second or third time to nail all the bonuses and unlockables (see 'Challenge everything').

Though clearly on firm ground with city streets and interior locations, *Black* will also contain non-urban areas, too, such as a cemetery and woodland areas. In some respects there's a similarity here to *Killzone*, but even at this stage *Black* is a more interesting title, its reactive, destructible world providing much more of a playground for experimentation.

So, while it failed to evoke a strong reaction from the man who was inspired by his back garden to create *Pikmin*, *Black* is trying to evolve the FPS genre in its own way. For the company's first effort at a game of this type, it's as confident a debut as you could imagine, its Hollywood excess and cathartic destruction proving a winning formula, at least on the evidence of two excellent levels. In fact, it's so good you'd be naive not to think EA already has a sequel in the pipeline.






The Encyclopedia of Arcade Video Games
Schiffer
AIGA
Pause & Effect the art of interactive narrative
meadows
VOICES THAT MATTER
New Riders
OFFICIAL PRICE GUIDE TO VIDEO GAMES
Edition #1
DAVID ELLIS
HOUSE OF COLLECTIBLES
CLASSIC VIDEO GAMES
Schiffer
CREDIT 00 I LOVE GAME GRAPHICS
TSUYOSHI KUSANO
FIRST PERSON
Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, editors
1983-1994
1983-1994
企画・監修
東京都写真美術館
Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography
Ohta Publishing
LevelX
CREATING A VIRTUAL WORLD
TEXT BY ERIC S. TRAUTMANN
BALLANTINE BOOKS
DEL REY
Great Designs that Changed the Face of Computer Gaming
Ste Curran
In The Beginning
Ralph H. Baer
ROLENTA PRESS
Difficult Questions About Videogames
Edited by James Newman and Iain Simons

TEXT ADVENTURES

Your Christmas list doesn't have to be filled with things that need to be plugged in. With this in mind, here's the ultimate guide to videogaming reads

It's a scenario with which you may be familiar: you're visiting a big city – New York, say, even London – and you fancy picking up something to read during the journey home. Why not a book about videogames? So you head for a big city-centre bookshop and ask at the information desk where the relevant section can be found. "A videogame section?" echoes the sales assistant. "I don't think we have such a thing." OK, so where might such books be found? Another blank expression. "Maybe you could look in the section we have for books which show you how to learn to program computers or make websites..."

With such travails in mind, it's easy to think that there simply aren't many books about videogames. As you'll see from the following pages, though, nothing could be further from the truth: there are dozens of the blessed things, focusing on all aspects of the medium, from academic-skewed studies to retro-obsessed art celebrations to collections of – yes – poetry and beyond.

Which is precisely why this month we decided to bring together a comprehensive selection in one place (space restrictions mean that we've been forced to discount many of the academically focused volumes that exist), allowing you to review what's available and earmark a selection for addition to your bookshelves.

Some of them are obvious cash-ins, others are helpful if you want to make yourself a career in games, still more simply provide absorbing insights into a pastime whose short but eventful history demands that it be recorded so that everyone can appreciate it.

CONFESSIONS OF THE GAME DOCTOR

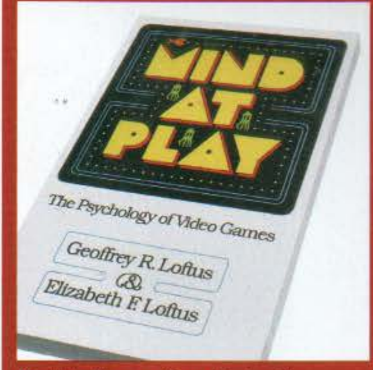
AUTHOR: Bill Kunkel
PUBLISHER: Rolenta
URL: www.rolentapress.com
ISBN: 0-964384-89-2



A misguided mess of me-me-me from a cofounder of the USA's groundbreaking Electronic Games magazine (1981-83). This autobiography is a jumble of timezone-hopping anecdotes (some duplicated from Kunkel's column on the Digital Press website), with the journalist boasting of dialling out for drugs as though they were pizza – which might just explain the lack of decent game-related memories. Non-events for which Kunkel was only a spectator (Arnie Katz raising his finger to an Activision executive) are given rambling eight-page treatments; important moments that 'The Game Doctor' *was* a part of (Electronic Games' role in making *Miner 2049er* the US equivalent of *Horace Goes Skiing*) are given a sentence. Kunkel does gamely serve up some biscuit-dry insight into his experiences during three mighty '80s court trials – but is soon back on track, listing all the famous people he's met.

MIND AT PLAY: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIDEO GAMES

AUTHOR: Geoffrey R Loftus & Elizabeth F Loftus
PUBLISHER: Basic Books
(OUT OF PRINT)
ISBN: 465046096



The 'latest' games from this book's perspective are *Frogger* and *Donkey Kong*. But it remains a seminal (and exhausting) 1983 investigation into videogame addictiveness, drawing on 'partial reinforcement' theory – where reward is tempered by a permanent feeling of 'could do better'. Best ignore the bizarrely inappropriate guide to game jargon at the back, though.

ELECTRONIC PLASTIC

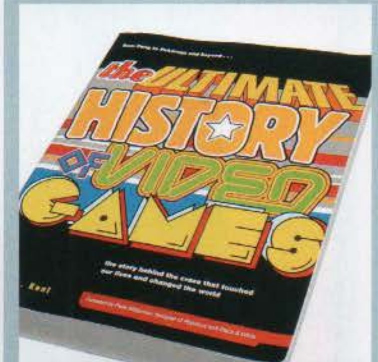
AUTHOR: Jaro Gielens & Buro Destruct
PUBLISHER: Die Gestalten Verlag
URL: www.die-gestalten.de
ISBN: 3-931126-44-7



Astonishingly rich photography of handheld wonders from the '70s and '80s, from Simon to tabletop Zaxxon, incorporated into a loud design that isn't ashamed to literally fill a page with a machine, box or manual. The brief descriptions are of little use – but with pictures like this, it's an odd reader who'll even notice there *is* text.

THE ULTIMATE HISTORY OF VIDEOGAMES

AUTHOR: Steven L Kent
PUBLISHER: Three Rivers Press
URL: www.randomhouse.com
ISBN: 0-761536-43-4



Originally self-published as The First Quarter by Kent – now editor of GameSpy but then better known for his work at MSNBC – this 600-page belter really is, alongside Phoenix, the ultimate history. Kent's dogged research has resulted in a slew of quality anecdotes: such as Stephen Ward trying to persuade a jury that adding a beard to a character constituted creating a 'linear player image' in the Alpex case that almost cost Nintendo a record-breaking $252 million. The Ultimate History is US-centric, inevitably, and weighted towards the Atari era: there's a noticeable lurch as Kent puts his foot to the floor to make it through 11 years in 200 pages. The few errors are glaring, too (*Super Mario Bros*'s minus world as intentional Easter egg rather than bug?). But it's the quintessential page-turner, with standout chapters – the background to PlayStation's rise and Saturn's fall; the in-fighting and bitching at the *Night Trap/Mortal Kombat* Joe Lieberman hearings – truly memorable.

THE MAKING OF DOOM 3

AUTHOR: Steven L Kent with id Software
PUBLISHER: Osborne
URL: www.osborne.com
ISBN: 0-072230-52-5



Reading like the voiceover to a fawning Making Of documentary, this explains the terms 'schedule' and 'Hanna-Barbera' one minute, and gushes about '4,000-polygon models' the next. A full 50+ pages is needlessly set aside for an early version of the *Doom 3* story, in text big enough to be seen from space.

POCKET ESSENTIALS: VIDEOGAMING

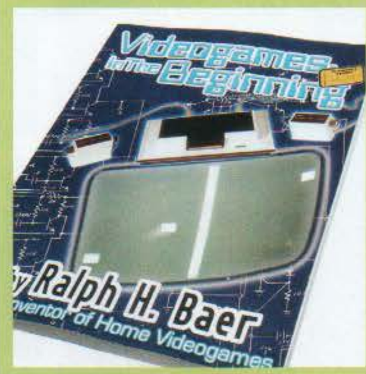
AUTHOR: Helen Flatley & Michael French
PUBLISHER: Pocket Essentials
URL: www.pocketessentials.com
ISBN: 1-904048-20-X



In size only as pocket-friendly as, say, a Nintendo DS, this is intended as a bluffer's guide to videogames. It fulfils the remit, with a brief overview of gaming history and even briefer essays on gaming culture – plus capsule reviews of essential titles (as of 2003). Recommended for newcomers.

VIDEOGAMES: IN THE BEGINNING

AUTHOR: Ralph H Baer
PUBLISHER: Rolenta
URL: www.rolentapress.com
ISBN: 0-964384-81-7



'Who really invented videogames?' begins Baer, and you can't begrudge the man for clambering atop the soapbox again – page upon page is spent asserting that he, not Nolan Bushnell, is the true father of gaming. The text is interesting but laborious: the real draw is the rich catalogue of patents, memos, circuit diagrams – and *that* visitor book, proving Bushnell saw Odyssey's *Ping-Pong* before devising *Pong*.

FAMILY COMPUTER 1983-1994

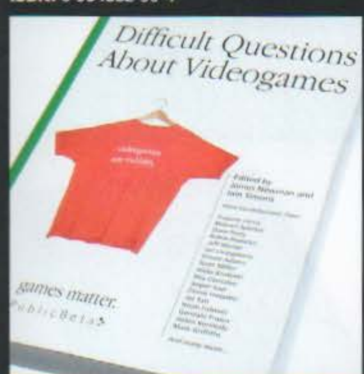
AUTHOR: Kengo Ishiguro (ed.)
PUBLISHER: Ohta Publishing
URL: www.ohtabooks.com
ISBN: 4-872338-03-0



Launched to coincide with a 20th anniversary Famicom exhibit in 2003, this is about as obsessive as videogame books get: a complete catalogue of the Famicom's 1,252-strong library of Japan-released carts. 160 get short reviews in Japanese and sweetly nonsensical English (*Super Mario Bros*: 'Man, this is a kick-ass!'). The rest are no more than names, dates and box photographs – box photographs with a curious pink tinge at that. Still, this treasure trove of trivia is full of surprises for western readers: such as how screaming into the oft-forgotten Famicom joypad microphone would 'make the battle planes appear' in Will Wright's *Raid On Bungeling Bay*. Interviews with big-name designers and developers – including Satoshi Tajiri, father to 386 Pokémon – round off a distinctly Japanese package that's not just for Famicompletists.

DIFFICULT QUESTIONS ABOUT VIDEOGAMES

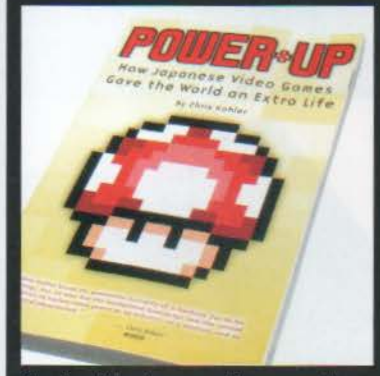
AUTHOR: James Newman & Iain Simons (ed.)
PUBLISHER: PublicBeta
URL: www.publicbeta.org
ISBN: 0-954882-50-4



A congealed pile of emails might not a great book make. But the variety of responses to the 15 difficult questions (including 'How do you tell if a videogame is rubbish?') makes this an ideal toilet browse. Many of the respondees – students, lecturers, developers – have too much or too little to say. Others have clearly misinterpreted the questions. But there are gems – not least a lawyer citing EA's buyout of Criterion and 'moves to promote videogames as an advertising medium' as his key gaming moments of 2004.

POWER UP: HOW JAPANESE VIDEO GAMES GAVE THE WORLD AN EXTRA LIFE

AUTHOR: Chris Kohler
PUBLISHER: Brady Games
URL: www.bradygames.com
ISBN: 0-744004-24-1



The view from Japan as videogames take shape, and an excellently researched one at that. Kohler's research is obvious throughout – he includes a photograph of the original Nintendo offices in Kyoto, still with its 'Nintendo Playing Card Co.' sign outside, and discovers that *Super Mario 64*'s Bowser-spinning emerged from a little-known (outside Japan) 1986 anime. Trouble is, this is a book of inexplicably lengthy and irritating distractions – Nintendo history interrupted with a needless examination of 'what is narrative?'; skippable mini-walkthroughs of *Zelda*, *Mario* and *Donkey Kong*; an astonishing *eight pages* dedicated to *Final Fantasy* music CDs. Still, there are strong chapters on Bemani, two gaijin in Japan (Giles Goddard and Dylan Cuthbert), and Pokémon. And this is the only place you'll observe Shigeru Miyamoto, referring to his brief period spent directing both *Super Mario Bros 2* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Adventure*, admit that, "I really thought I was going to die."

RE:PLAY

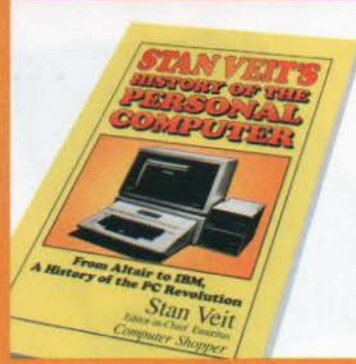
AUTHOR: Liz Faber
PUBLISHER: Laurence King
URL: www.laurence-king.com
ISBN: 1-856691-40-3



The spiritual mum of Supercade, Re:Play tracks the visual development of seven stock game genres (no room for 'miscellaneous' here) with large, glossy screenshots. It's a product of its time – Faber won't be giving the N64's *Fighter's Destiny* a spread of 108 screenshots to itself again – but a smorgasbord of pixelated eye candy all the same. Interviews with Toby Gard and John Romero are included by law.

STAN VEIT'S HISTORY OF THE HOME COMPUTER

AUTHOR: Stan Veit
PUBLISHER: WorldComm
ISBN: 156664030X



Veit rode the crest of the first home computing wave – albeit in a suit and tie, as manager of one of the earliest computer stores in the US, and later the editor-in-chief of Computer Shopper. His history of pre-IBM PC machines is rich on personal anecdote, and fusses over painfully obscure machines (the SWTPC 6800, anyone?) in addition to the usual TRS, Atari and Commodore boxes of tricks.

PIKACHU'S GLOBAL ADVENTURES

AUTHOR: Joseph Tobin (ed.)
PUBLISHER: Duke University Press
URL: www.dukeupress.edu
ISBN: 822332876



Grown-ups gaze at the Pokémon phenomenon in a scholarly manner. Teachers, media studies lecturers and sociologists explain how Pokémon taps into the Japanese love of all things cute; explore why western audiences missed out on the franchise's ruder moments; and ponder whether 386 warring slave-monsters have anything to teach children.

CYBERTEXT: PERSPECTIVES ON ERGODIC LITERATURE

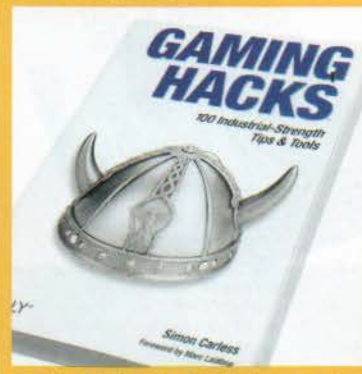
AUTHOR: Espen J Aarseth
PUBLISHER: Johns Hopkins University Press
URL: www.hf.uib.no/cybertext/
ISBN: 0-801855-79-9



Norwegian researcher Aarseth is a rapidly rising star of videogame literature, and lugs around several axes for grinding. To him, traditional literary criticism as applied to 'ergodic literature' (his term for interactive narrative) is a waste of effort. This heavy-going read was originally Aarseth's doctoral thesis, but is unusually entertaining for a PhD as he tears apart attempts to categorise the goings-on in games – laying into previous attempts to describe *Lemmings* in terms of 'signs'; demystifying Michael Joyce's much-trumpeted hypertext 'book' Afternoon. There's a sense Aarseth is over-egging the pudding – he admits to regular criticism of his theories, and this is clearly an attempt to shut everyone up – but he has some enlightening thoughts: not least that 'interactive' texts have *less* involvement than usual for the reader, who can't flick through the story at will.

GAMING HACKS

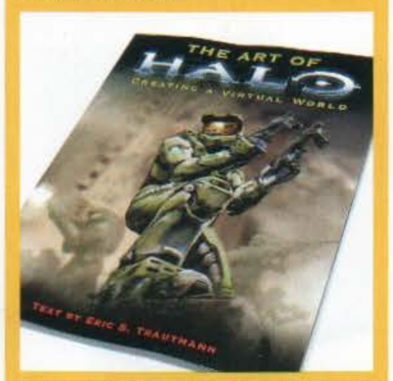
AUTHOR: Simon Carless
PUBLISHER: O'Reilly
URL: www.oreilly.com
ISBN: 0-596007-14-0



O'Reilly's Hacks series has fast become the thinking technology user's ...for Dummies. This one, created by ubiquitously talented Game Developer Magazine editor Simon Carless, starts off innocently enough by describing how to emulate the C64 and Atari. But it's soon off on a breakneck journey of machinima creation, NES sound chip composition, SNES emulation... on the *Dreamcast*, and – bizarrest of all – hacking the Nuon DVD-games hybrid (aka the *Tempest 3000* system). Accessible but deep, infectiously passionate about games, and with hundreds of links to relevant websites, these 100 hacks will have even the most jaded of gamers leaping out of their sofa to try something they never knew. A full 36 pages on creating an adventure game is Carless's main failing, but we'll forgive him for his intimate style and great sense of humour (PlayStation 2 has the 'mullet approach' to connectivity: 'business in front and party in the back').

THE ART OF HALO

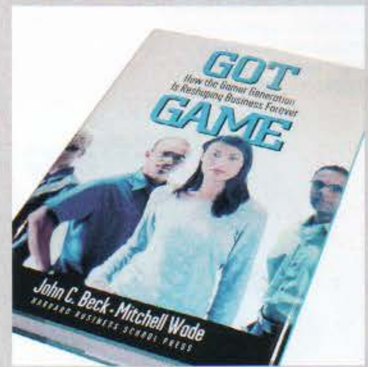
AUTHOR: Eric S Trautmann
PUBLISHER: Ballantine
URL: www.delreybooks.com
ISBN: 0-345475-86-0



Gratifyingly, this is more 'The Concept Art Of Halo': screenshots and completed renders aren't permitted to swamp the pencil sketches and early drawings. The text isn't much use to anyone who already knows that artists 'turn to a variety of sources for inspiration', but good stories abound – such as the Elite originally having its tail literally between its legs.

GOT GAME

AUTHOR: John C Beck & Mitchell Wade
PUBLISHER: Harvard Business School Press
URL: www.hbspress.org
ISBN: 1-578519-49-7



Describing games as 'an amazingly effective training camp' sounds like Jack Thompson territory – but Beck and Wade instead argue that gaming teaches 'critical business skills', and the book gives bewildered, frightened managers some tips on exploiting this intimidating generation of ass-kickers. It's nonsense. The conclusions rely on painting gaming in thick, careless strokes ('The gaming experience is basically solitary, even if played in groups'), and the authors seriously imply that the dotcom boom emerged from entrepreneurs believing they were playing a videogame. Unconvincing as its arguments are – the 'rebelliousness' of gaming (as opposed to, say, music or peers) is apparently responsible for shaping the attitudes and skills of a whole generation – there are some interesting results from the authors' survey of 2,500 young professionals. Regular gamers are apparently more loyal, competitive and skill-focused than their luddite peers. The mistake the book makes is relating this to the kind of 'goals' and 'boundaries' that Dilbert was rolling a sardonic eye at ten years ago.

I LOVE GAME GRAPHICS

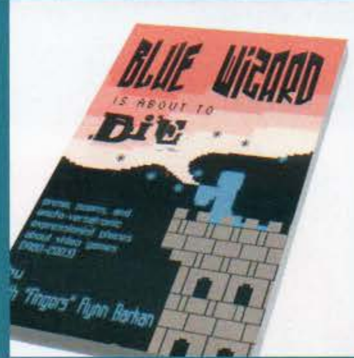
AUTHOR: Tsuyoshi Kusano, Nobuhiko Sagara & Kazutoshi Iida (ed.)
PUBLISHER: AllRightsReserved
URL: www.allrights-reserved.com
ISBN: 9-889705-43-5



The spread given over to a photograph of a Japanese model disinterestedly handling a Game Boy instantly sums up the attitude of this rubber-covered exercise in gaming-cum-graphic-illustration. We have a soft spot for the collage of fake logos at the back – but that's hardly worth £20. Especially when they can't even get the MAME screenshot aspect ratios right.

BLUE WIZARD IS ABOUT TO DIE

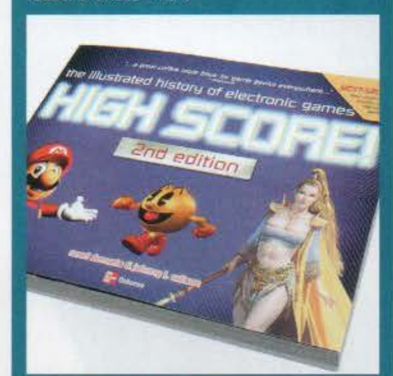
AUTHOR: Seth Flynn
PUBLISHER: Rusty Immelmann Pres
URL: www.ripress.net
ISBN: 974100005



Hopefully not the last book of game-inspired poetry, this compiles 47 verses including 'The Mega Man Haikus' and 'Mario in Exile' ('"I AM PLANNING GREAT THINGS!"/the drunken Italian dictator shouts/legs extended, like Stalin/in repose before the fireplace'). Poignantly illustrated with woodcut-esque pencil sketches.

HIGH SCORE!: THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF ELECTRONIC GAMES

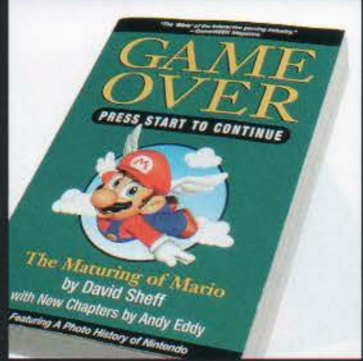
AUTHOR: Rusel Demaria & Johnny L Wilson
PUBLISHER: Osborne
URL: www.osborne.com
ISBN: 0-072231-72-6



Schizophrenic it may be – memorable photos and anecdotes on one page (Atari director George Kiss being told he could have his best *Defender* score as a salary bonus), a totally out-of-place screenshot-recognition 'quiz' on the next. And errors? Plenty. As reviews have pointed out, something has clearly gone awry when LucasArts' *Ballblazer* and *Rescue On Fractalus* are described as having been pirated 'on the internet'... in 1984. But, unlike its friends, High Score! finds room for computers as well as the oft-told tales of consoles and coin-ops, giving companies like Broderbund, Sierra, Cinemaware and Infocom a rare bask in the spotlight. The images and photographs are incredibly rich, too – Demaria and Wilson have carefully chosen concept art, memorabilia and rarer game art, to truly evoke the age of airbrushed adverts and stitch-on Atari badges. Even better: this second edition adds an appendix on the 'European' (read: British) game scene – it's brief, but which other history acknowledges (and pictures) the likes of Mike Singleton, the Bitmaps and Core Design?

GAME OVER

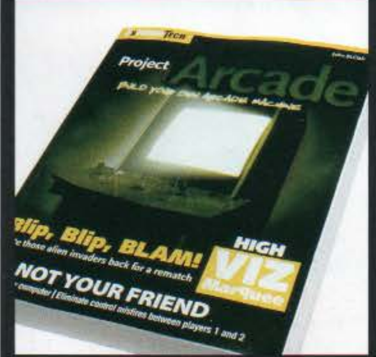
AUTHOR: David Sheff and Andy Eddy
PUBLISHER: GamePress
(OUT OF PRINT)
ISBN: 0-966961-70-6



Seminal book that expertly peers behind the curtain to reveal the wizards at work, with unprecedented access to Nintendo insiders – has anyone else been invited to Hiroshi Yamauchi's house, ever? Two new chapters bring the tale up to 1999 (Sheff's original ended with a quaintly dated discussion of CDi and interactivity), but offer little of interest.

PROJECT ARCADE: BUILD YOUR OWN ARCADE MACHINE

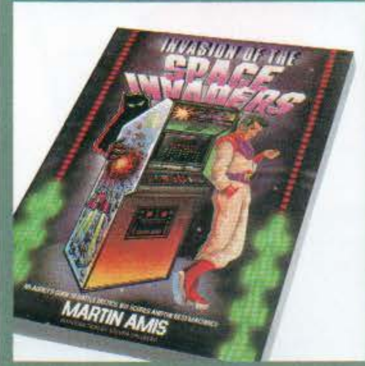
AUTHOR: John St Clair
PUBLISHER: Wiley
URL: www.wiley.com
ISBN: 0-764556-16-9



476 pages and one CD-ROM of breathtaking detail, some of it (building your own trackball spinner from old hard drive parts?) bordering on worrying. The American retailers St Clair mentions aren't of much use – but the passion is so infectious that we defy anyone to pick this up and not find themselves at B&Q the next weekend trying to cram a 49-inch sheet of MDF into the boot.

INVASION OF THE SPACE INVADERS

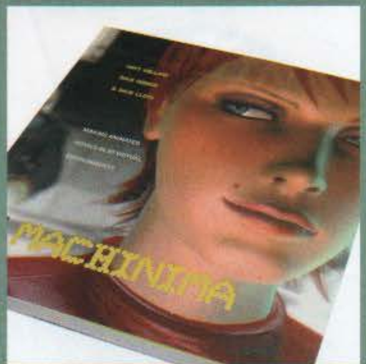
AUTHOR: Martin Amis
PUBLISHER: Celestial Arts
(OUT OF PRINT)
ISBN: 890873518



The holy grail for the videogame book collector (secondhand copies are $169 on Amazon at the time of writing), Invasion... is what happens when a writer who could get a napkin proposal published falls in love with *Defender*. Lost in the sights and sounds of his newfound addiction with videogames good and bad ('Whoever devised *Gorf* ought to be condemned to play the hateful thing for all eternity'), Amis pens a passionate dispatch from the 'golden age'. Albeit one he'd probably rather forget.

MACHINIMA

AUTHOR: Matt Kelland, Dave Morris & Dave Lloyd
PUBLISHER: Ilex
URL: www.ilex-press.com
ISBN: 1-904705-64-2



Well, why not? It's perhaps no surprise to see such a niche pursuit get its own book – Machinima treads away from videogames and into the much 'safer' area of movies, after all. What is surprising is the elastic treatment of the subject: the inappropriate use of prerendered FMV on the cover; the scant attention given to breakout machinima like Red vs Blue and MTV's Video Mods; the surely irrelevant discussion of Steven Spielberg building 3D cities as research for AI. Still, at 200 pages, it's certainly thorough – the history of Machinima from 'Diary of a Camper' to 'The Tournament' is useful – and there are some handy tips for potential machinimists in the last third. It's just a pity to see so many interview-based case studies when the 'stories' behind most Machinima movies are, frankly, not very interesting.

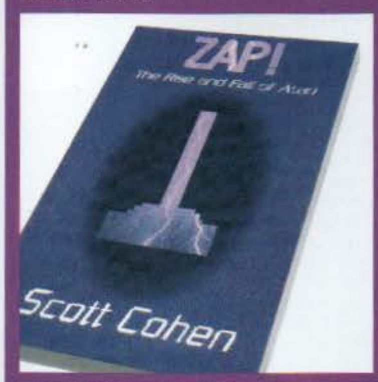
VIDEO GAME ART

AUTHOR: Nic Kelman
PUBLISHER: Assouline
URL: www.assoulineusa.com
ISBN: 2-843237-29-7

It's hard to argue against the inclusion of renders from, say, *No One Lives Forever* – it's 'video game art', after all. But there's little sense of selection based on artistic merit in a book that could, it's said, 'help art school grads to appreciate the aesthetic accomplishments that are all around them'.

ZAP! THE RISE AND FALL OF ATARI

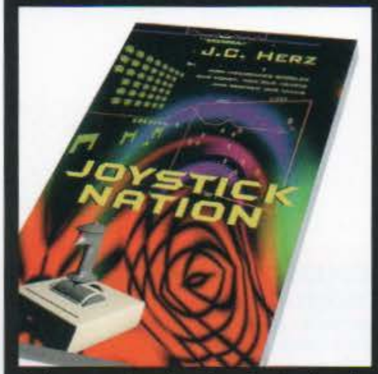
AUTHOR: Scott Cohen
PUBLISHER: McGraw-Hil
ISBN: 70115435



Recently reprinted (it was originally published in 1983), this can be safely avoided now that Steven L Kent has conjured up a compelling take on the Atari disaster. Good on stories about Pizza Time Theater; not so good on interesting game-related anecdotes or grammar.

JOYSTICK NATION

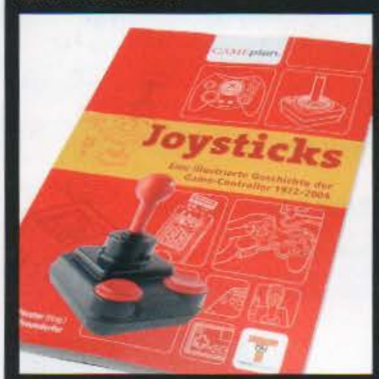
AUTHOR: JC Herz
PUBLISHER: Little Brown
(OUT OF PRINT)
ISBN: 316360074



A diverse exploration of gaming's cultural and social impact. Herz isn't your typical gamer: rueing the invasive marketing techniques of publishers, comparing gaming magazines to pornography, and getting very upset that *SimCity* lacks a conscience. Leaping between subjects while arbitrarily interviewing the likes of Eugene Jarvis, Herz makes this journey too personal for its own good.

JOYSTICKS

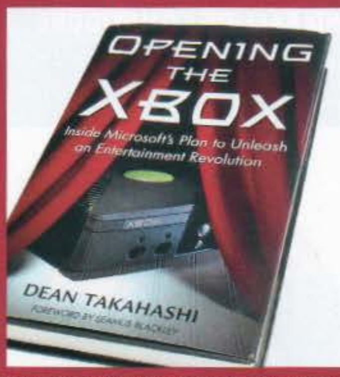
AUTHOR: Winnie Forster & Stephan Freundorfer
PUBLISHER: Gameplan
URL: www.game-machines.co.uk
ISBN: 3-000121-83-6



The companion piece to Encyclopedia of Game Machines (a third Gameplan book, concentrating on games, is due in English next year). Quite how this made it into print is beyond rational explanation, but we're glad it did: this is a bewilderingly comprehensive gallery of 280 videogame controllers, from the Odyssey's fat square box to Sony's EyeToy, taking in long-forgotten input devices like Global A's Maestromusic Stick and Broderbund's 'U-Force' electronic punchbag along the way. The Gameplan team's strange obsession with numbers continues (the Amiga mouse is 10% better than the Dreamcast joypad, you'll be pleased to find out at last), but exemplary photography – complete with diagrams explaining the operation of some truly intimidating devices – should make this an instant talking point if left casually strewn on the coffee table. The English translation should be out now.

OPENING THE XBOX

AUTHOR: Dean Takashi
PUBLISHER: Prima Publishing
URL: www.primapublishing.com
ISBN: 0-761537-08-2



Bill Gates' robot henchmen will be seizing copies of this any day now. In revealing the war of Microsoft factions that led to the birth of the Xbox, Takeshi's book makes it clear that Xbox 360 is everything that the original Xbox team hated ("Convergence is bullshit," as Seamus Blackley puts it here). But it's when the book escapes the slow-going series of initial meetings and proposals that Opening The Xbox truly takes off: who could fail to raise a wry smile at the secret internal demo that showed Sonic, Mario and Crash Bandicoot arrogantly gunned down by trashcan-destined Xbox mascot Raven? Or resist a raised eyebrow at the news that a vacuum-based Xbox game was cancelled the moment Nintendo unveiled *Luigi's Mansion*? The tales of drunken pranks by the fratboy-esque Xbox team can grate, but the sense of Microsoft seesawing between bullishness and despondency is expertly evoked. And Takeshi leaves not a single stone unturned: this is the place to learn the story behind all those rumours about Microsoft attempting to buy Nintendo and Sega. (Yes, they were true.)

EXTRA LIFE: COMING OF AGE IN CYBERSPACE

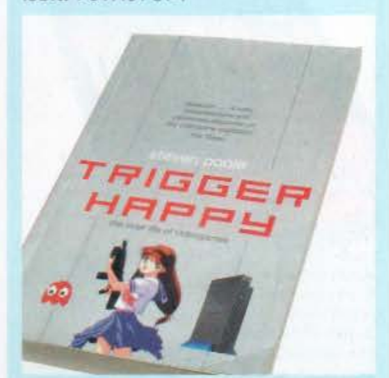
AUTHOR: David S Bennahum
PUBLISHER: Basic Books
URL: www.basicbooks.com
ISBN: 0-465012-36-1



The slight autobiography of a life shaped by the arrival of the microprocessor is aimed mainly at those born too late (or too early) to lift a home micro out of its polystyrene shell. But there's the odd nostalgic twinge to be had for anyone who recalls the magic of shimmering telly-dots greeting you with 'HELLO [your name]' on Christmas morning.

TRIGGER HAPPY: THE INNER LIFE OF VIDEOGAMES

AUTHOR: Steven Poole
PUBLISHER: Fourth Estate
URL: www.4thestate.co.uk
ISBN: 1-841151-21-1



It's never been clear why Poole felt a need to use weak song-based puns as chapter subtitles, but otherwise this is must-read: at once a celebration of games and a vital prod at the reasons *why* we play, drawing on wider literature at large but remaining thoroughly accessible. Surely in need of an update, though: the afterword's talk of Dreamcast and the 'keenly anticipated' *Black & White* is jarring.

SUPERCADE

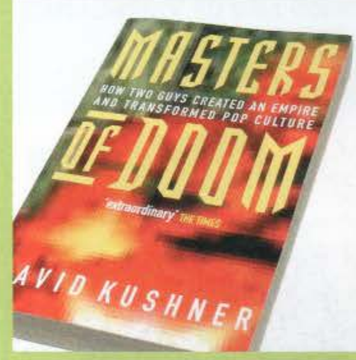
AUTHOR: Van Burnham
PUBLISHER: MIT Press
URL: mitpress.mit.edu
ISBN: 0-262524-20-1



Aside from a confusingly ambiguous cover, Supercade is the book your coffee table was made for, with over 400 pages, mouthwatering images of games and consoles from 1971 to 1984, decent write-ups and unique articles (including a firstperson account of the making of mainframe-based fossil *Spacewar!*). Be warned, though: the glossy pages are vulnerable to greasy finger smears.

MASTERS OF DOOM

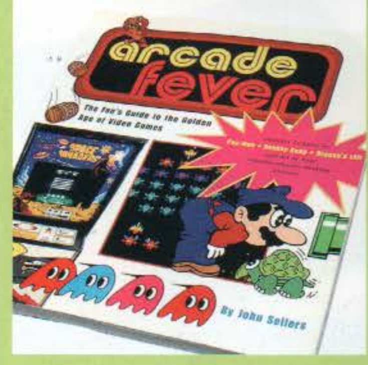
AUTHOR: David Kushner
PUBLISHER: Piatkus
URL: www.piatkus.co.uk
ISBN: 0-749924-89-6



A gripping chronicle of the meteoric rise of id and the catastrophic tumble of Ion Storm. Kushner has spoken to almost the entire id clan, allowing him to catalogue the Carmack-Romero tensions and unravel one of gaming's most rock'n'roll rides – Romero alone is listed in the index under 'rock star image of', 'houses of' and 'death rumours surrounding'. The stories of wanton office destruction give the impression of a gang of tantrum-tormented teens, out of their depth in all but creativity and passion, while room is found to explore gamier issues such as the rise and fall of shareware distribution, the furore over violent games, and the bizarre tale of how id almost gave PC owners an officially licensed *Super Mario Bros.*

ARCADE FEVER

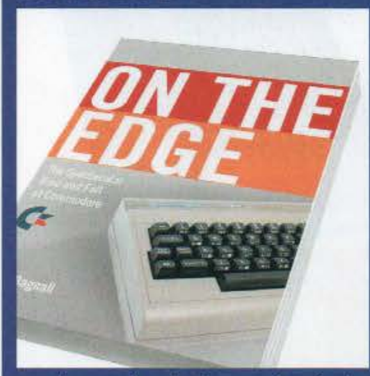
AUTHOR: John Sellers
PUBLISHER: Running Press
URL: www.runningpress.com
ISBN: 0-762409-37-1



Sellers' knockabout 'I Heart The 80s' style is US-centric and often rankles – the unfolding of his 'Zaxxon, Zaxoff' Karate Kid pun is particularly painful to watch. But the reminiscing on over 60 'golden era' coin-ops is refreshing: no other book dwells on the pleasure of *Donkey Kong*'s 'How High Can You Get' theme. Good photos, too.

ON THE EDGE: THE SPECTACULAR RISE AND FALL OF COMMODORE

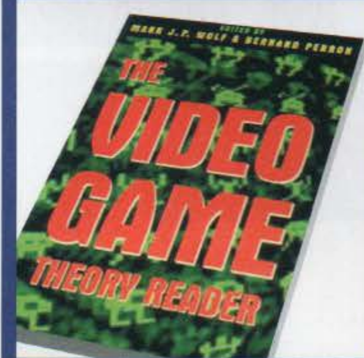
AUTHOR: Brian Bagnall
PUBLISHER: Valiant Press
URL: www.commodorebook.com
ISBN: 0-9738649-0-7



"He destroyed me, he destroyed my family, he did all kinds of terrible things." And that's from one of the men who's *grateful* to Jack Tramiel. Bagnall has racked up 44 hours of interviews (although Tramiel himself refused to talk) for this definitive and detailed take on one of videogaming history's most volatile companies – and two of the world's most popular computers.

VIDEO GAME THEORY READER

AUTHOR: Mark J P Wolf & Bernard Perron (ed.)
PUBLISHER: Routledge
URL: www.routledge.com
ISBN: 0-415965-79-9



Top of the reading list for students of gaming. Wolf once again supplies the best chapter himself: an essay on abstraction in videogames that couldn't be timelier with next-gen systems chasing 'realism' like a dog its tail. Rehak and Filiciak both touch on the idea of avatars supplying 'eternal life' – the former in terms of repeated resurrection and rebirth, the latter exploring players who reinvent their personality via MMORPGs. Grodal makes an impassioned plea for *ignoring* the psychological consequences of gaming and concentrating instead on the observable scientific effects; Consalvo takes that literally by exploring how videogames can give gamers 'observable scientific reactions' of the sexual kind. The rest throw entire trees' worth of kindling on to the bonfire of ludology vs narratology. In short: essential.

COLLECTING CLASSIC VIDEO GAMES

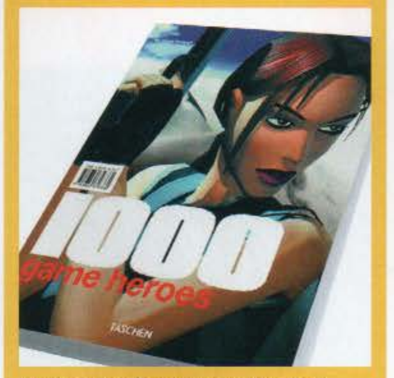
AUTHOR: Billy Galaxy
PUBLISHER: Schiffer
URL: www.schifferbooks.com
ISBN: 0-764314-56-4



This is wasted money for even beginner collectors: a clumsy jumble of vintage box photographs from the Atari era, and a bare minimum of historical context. The blurriness of the photographs conjures up that 'browsing through eBay' feeling.

1000 GAME HEROES

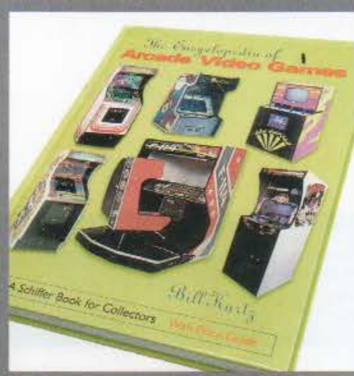
AUTHOR: David Choquet
PUBLISHER: Taschen
URL: www.taschen.com
ISBN: 3-822816-33-7



A trilingual coffee table monster that pigeonholes prerendered artwork into ten ill-conceived categories of 'hero'. There's enough room here for esoteric stars – Shadowman, *Crazy Taxi* drivers, Worms – but Choquet favours characters with artwork that's easiest to source.

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ARCADE VIDEO GAMES

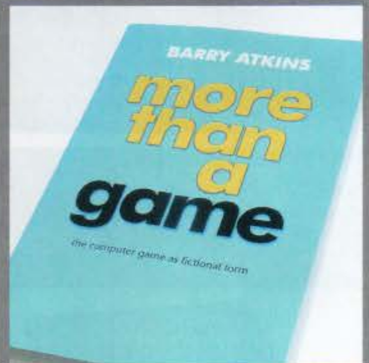
AUTHOR: Bill Kurtz
PUBLISHER: Schiffer
URL: www.schifferbooks.com
ISBN: 0-764319-25-6



An ink-and-paper arcade of over 600 coin-ops. Little more than a kind of offline klov.com minus the text, but rarities such as Sega's holographic *Time Traveller* and the Spanish *Space Invaders* cabinet (*Space King II*) work in its favour, as do non-emulated screenshots and efficient captions. Plus, a *Pac-Man* candy pack that someone's somehow managed to avoid eating for nigh-on two decades.

MORE THAN A GAME

AUTHOR: Barry Atkins
PUBLISHER: Manchester University Press
URL: www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk
ISBN: 0-719063-65-5



Espen Aarseth will be spitting blood: Atkins applies traditional critical techniques of film and books to rustle up 'readings' of the narratives in *Tomb Raider*, *Half-Life*, *Close Combat* and – perhaps not the first choice for an examination of game story – *SimCity*. There *is* something frustrating about seeing games described as though they're simply apeing much older media (*Half-Life* has 'learned the lessons of recent horror films' in audio terms; *Tomb Raider* is reduced to a series of Indiana Jones and James Bond cribs). And choosing *Close Combat* is clearly a copout – it's no surprise to see Atkins listing seemingly every World War II film he can think of. The author's posturising on the linearity of game progress would have been more interesting, too, had he chosen less obviously linear games (eg, *Grand Theft Auto* or *Wario Ware*).

SMARTBOMB: THE QUEST FOR ART, ENTERTAINMENT AND BIG BUCKS IN THE VIDEOGAME REVOLUTION

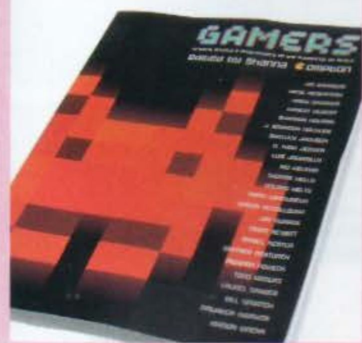
AUTHOR: Heather Chaplin & Aaron Ruby
PUBLISHER: Algonquin
URL: www.smartbomb.us
ISBN: 1-565123-46-8



From a husband-and-wife team, a new book that – yes – 'traces the videogame evolution'. Smartbomb is concerned with culture over chronology, though: game expos are given the anthropological treatment, and there are fireworks in the Ruby-Chaplin household when a close friendship is formed in *Star Wars Galaxies*.

GAMERS

AUTHOR: Shanna Compton (ed.)
PUBLISHER: Soft Skull press
URL: www.softskull.com
ISBN: 1-932360-57-3



A slight but loveable book that pulls together the youthful gaming experiences of writers, artists and developers: tales that begin with "In 1987 I had one goal in life – make it to the end of *Double Dragon*" and end with a Paula Abdul quote (or, in one anomalous instance, "Marduk and Tiamat eternally feuding in the autonomous two-dimension space of myth"). In the hands of poets and novelists, this becomes probably the only book on these pages to truly capture the *joy* of games: building a mental map of *Vice City* as detailed as the one of your hometown; that multiplayer moment when the loser skulks wordlessly out of the door and home; the urge to collect, climb and explore real-life scenery after too many hours platforming. It loses its way as it treads into theory and narrative – but at its best is pure, saccharine-sweet nostalgia.

FREAX: VOLUME 1

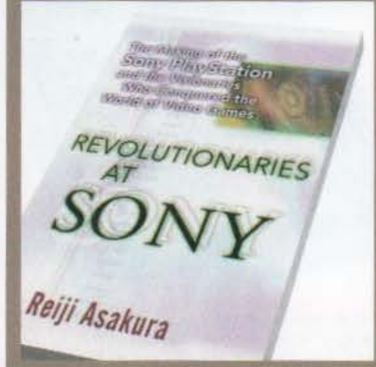
AUTHOR: Tomas Polgar
PUBLISHER: CSW-Verlag
URL: www.freaxbook.com
ISBN: 3-981049-40-3



A unique and incredibly detailed work – a retrospective on the intertwining demo, diskmag and hacking scenes of the '80s, focusing mainly on the C64 and the Amiga, and meticulously researched and illustrated. A follow-up volume that takes in computers including the PC and ZX Spectrum is planned.

REVOLUTIONARIES AT SONY

AUTHOR: Reiji Asakura
PUBLISHER: McGraw Hill
(OUT OF PRINT)
ISBN: 71355871



The 'authorised' story of the rise of PlayStation reads like a passionate love letter to Ken Kutagari. Properly intended as a motivational manual on how to run a business like the formidable Sony boss, this provides only limited insight into the Nintendo-Sony machinations that birthed 'a modern miracle' (Asakura's words).

THE ZX SPECTRUM BOOK: 1982 to 199X

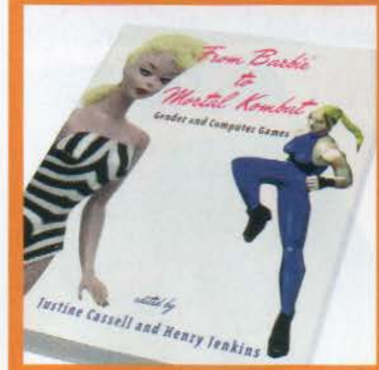
AUTHOR: Andrew Rollings
PUBLISHER: Self-published
URL: www.zxgoldenyears.com



There are some strange picks here: not least games like *Fish!* and *Carrier Command* that would surely be best kicked out in favour of more Speccy-oriented product. The design is hardly outstanding, the text unexciting and stodgily unenthusiastic, but for former 'Spec-chums', this unique tribute to the colour clash of yore will prove hard to resist.

FROM BARBIE TO MORTAL KOMBAT: GENDER AND COMPUTER GAMES

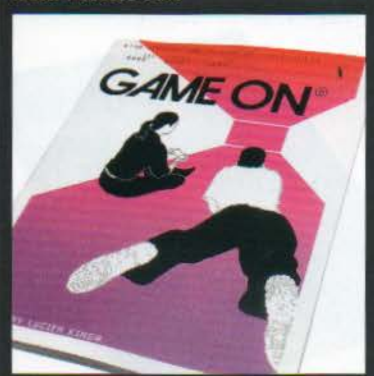
AUTHORS: Justine Cassell & Henry Jenkins (ed.)
PUBLISHER: MIT Press
URL: mitpress.mit.edu
ISBN: 0-262531-68-2



A full third of this is interviews, which, while interesting (the subjects include a Saturn-era corporate vice-president at Sega and Mattel's software chief), would have benefited from more analysis and less dutiful dictaphone transcription. The rest is an excellent primer on girls and games: not least the editor's introduction, which so comprehensively draws together the literature that it almost negates the need for the rest of the book. Gender lines are explored by Yasmin B Kafai when she asks children to become game designers (a chapter based on her book Minds in Play), while in Retooling Play the industry's attitude to gender is explored through the female narrator in 'girl game' *Phoenix Quest* (designed, of course, by a man). This is frustratingly short on solutions to the problem of videogaming's 'boy culture', though. The editors admit that they 'haven't found *the* answer yet' – and this is no better demonstrated than by the lack of believable explanations why *Barbie Fashion Designer* outsold *Quake* in the US.

GAME ON: THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF VIDEOGAMES

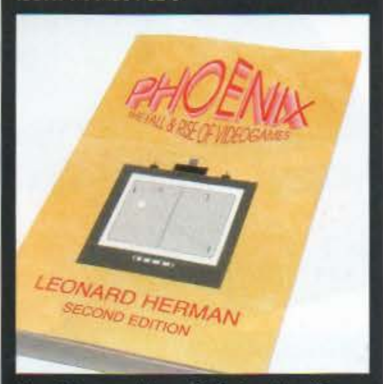
AUTHOR: Lucien King (ed.)
PUBLISHER: Laurence King
URL: www.laurenceking.co.uk
ISBN: 1-856693-04-X



Not quite as lightweight as a cursory leaf through its colour-blocked pages might suggest, Game On dives into the semi-deep end of the videogame theory pool with 14 brief essays – some from local celebs such as Steven Poole and J C Herz, others from 17-year-old gamers who happily point the reader to illegal ROM sites. The subjects are familiar – violence, girlz, MMORPGs, narrative – but there's a pleasing international flavour: Andreas Lange's examination of the Euro-scene stands almost alone in the field. Not all of it is good – the 'Pokémon as Japanese culture' chapter draws to a close at the precise point where it should be getting started – but Eric Zimmerman's tremendously passionate treatise on independent games easily makes up for any shortfall.

PHOENIX: THE FALL & RISE OF VIDEOGAMES

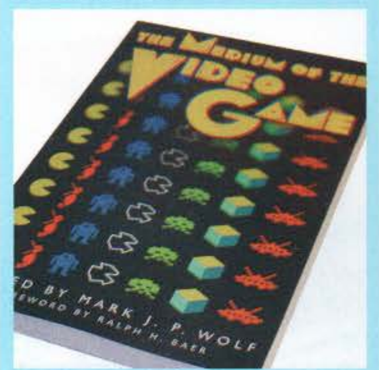
AUTHOR: Leonard Herman
PUBLISHER: Rolenta Press
URL: www.rolentapress.com
ISBN: 0-964384-82-5



Now 11 years old and in its fourth edition, Pheonix is a true classic. Unravelling a quarter-century of gaming, year by year, it's been researched until it squeaks – and works hard to deliver a photograph of every console and handheld mentioned. Which is essentially all of them. Herman's sparkle-free text means you're reading almost a straight list of system launches in the busier years, but if you're really into gaming, your bookshelf needs this.

THE MEDIUM OF THE VIDEOGAME

AUTHOR: Mark J P Wolf (ed.)
PUBLISHER: University of Texas Press
URL: www.utexaspress.com
ISBN: 0-292791-50-X



A critical read for anyone looking to go deeper into games than pressing Start. Mark J P Wolf's own four chapters aren't the most explosively exciting of reads – see Trigger Happy for a less zombie-like approach to the nuts and bolts of electronic entertainment. But they're unsurpassed when it comes to picking apart space, time, narrative and genre in games – much of it obvious to the 'hardcore', but still a fascinating lid-lifting on the internal whirrings and clickings of an underexplored medium. The final three chapters are jarringly objective when held up against the rest, though. And Ralph H Baer can't resist using his foreword to once again reassert that it really was he who invented videogames.

DIGITAL RETRO

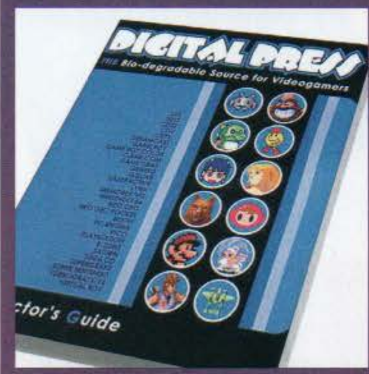
AUTHOR: Gordon Laing
PUBLISHER: Ilex
URL: www.ilex-press.com
ISBN: 1-904705-39-1



Celebrating the age of the 'micro' with luscious photography of 38 computers (plus six consoles) from 1975 to 1988. Digital Retro is Brit-written – gaze at the $3,250 HP-85, flip the page, and there's a membrane-keyboarded Cambridge oddity smirking back at you. Text is sparse and objective given the number of interviewees – nearly 40, including Jack Tramiel and Sir Clive – but Laing shoehorns a fascinating anecdote (the Dragon 32 as government-subsidised computer for farmers?) on to almost every page. Good stuff.

DIGITAL PRESS VIDEO GAME COLLECTOR'S GUIDES

AUTHOR: Joe Santulli
PUBLISHER: Digital Press
URL: www.digitpress.com
ISBN: 0-970980-72-8 / 0-970980-70-1



One covers 8bit systems, the other goes 16bits and up: both offer 500+ pages of vintage game information so tightly packed it brings tears to the eyes. Much of what's here is duplicated on the Digital Press website, but the price guide and factually flawless capsule reviews make it worth its weight in dead wood.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GAME MACHINES

AUTHOR: Winnie Forster
PUBLISHER: Gameplan
URL: www.game-machines.co.uk
ISBN: 3-000153-59-4



Anyone familar with stats-obsessed German magazines won't be surprised by the scores out of five or the gigantic comparison table inside this satisfyingly comprehensive collection of games machines – quite how Forster has decided that the PC is two stars 'better' than an Atari Lynx, or what possible use such information could be, is a mystery. This is clearly a labour of love for Forster, though: the design and photography is impeccable as machines as obscure as the Entex Adventurevision (with its anaemic line-up of just four cartridges) and the Intertron VC4000 (a German-only VCS-alike) are exhumed. The text overflows with information – none of it necessarily new, but all that much more interesting for being included in one bang-up-to-date book that just squeezes in the DS and PSP. Shame the English translation of the original German lets Forster down: grammatical errors and stray 'und's abound.

FIRST PERSON

AUTHORS: Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan (ed.)
PUBLISHER: MIT Press
URL: mitpress.mit.edu
ISBN: 0-262232-32-4



Buying this book (only half of which concerns videogames directly) gets you a ringside seat for the spectacularly bloody fistfight between the ludologists and the narratologists. Espen Aarseth's essay, in particular, is drenched in the bile that ludologists seem to store up especially for those who try to explain – or even simply describe – story in videogames. The book's big problem is that high-profile names like *The Sims* and *Tomb Raider* are over-used as examples. So the real highlights concern (currently) niche products: online celebre *Facade* is given a detailed analysis by one of its creators; sociopolitical games are discussed ('not as simple as replacing Mario and Luigi with [Italian anarchists] Sacco and Vanzetti'); and time in videogames gets a good going over. First Person's experimental approach – the main essays run alongside responses from gamers and professionals – makes it a pleasingly meaty read. The 'imagined panel presentations' continue at the book's website.

GAME PLAN: GREAT DESIGNS THAT CHANGED THE FACE OF COMPUTER GAMING

AUTHOR: Ste Curran
PUBLISHER: RotoVisio
URL: www.rotovision.com
ISBN: 2-880466-96-2



It's as interesting as ever to read fresh insight from new interviews with developers, but this is too sparse a collection of games and text to justify the £20 outlay. With games like *Half-Life*, *The Sims* and *Tomb Raider* covered, there's a sense we've been here too many times before – and the lazy 'related game' spreads don't help (two of the three games inspired by *Super Mario 64*: *Super Mario Sunshine* and *Super Mario 128*).

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO GAME DEVELOPMENT, ART & DESIGN

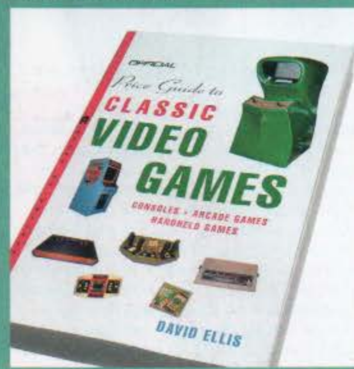
AUTHOR: David McCarthy, Ste Curran & Simon Byron
PUBLISHER: Ilex
URL: www.ilex-press.com
ISBN: 1-904705-48-0



This reads – and looks – like an extended magazine article, but works well as an approachable introduction to game design for the wannabe developer, with only the unhelpfully sparse interviews falling flat. The case studies of exceptional level design, narrative, audio – and buggy coding – are particularly good. Just try to find another book that bigs up *Katamari*, *Ico* and *Monty On The Run*.

OFFICIAL PRICE GUIDE TO CLASSIC VIDEOGAMES

AUTHOR: David Ellis
PUBLISHER: House of Collectibles
URL: www.houseofcollectibles.com
ISBN: 0-375720-38-3



Hard to say what makes this 'official' – anyone can cull (often inflated) price data from eBay and online sellers. But with its large selection of 'golden era' systems, handhelds and coin-ops (priced loose and boxed), it's a useful pocket reference, if disappointingly picture-free.

HALF-LIFE 2: RAISING THE BAR

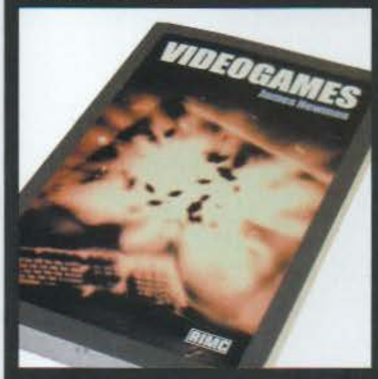
AUTHOR: Valve
PUBLISHER: Prima Games
URL: www.primagames.com
ISBN: 0-761543-64-3



There's a sense that every filing cabinet at Valve HQ has been raided for 280 pages of concept art, drawings and scripts. The highlight is an email exchange concerning which set of glasses would best suit Breen – but there's an admirable willingness throughout to show off abandoned character, weapon and map designs.

VIDEOGAMES

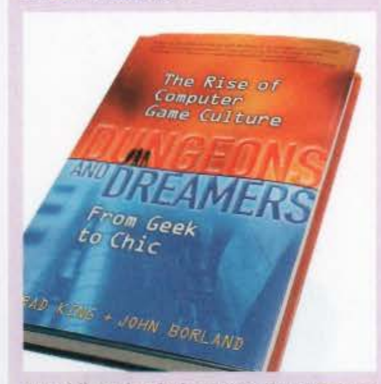
AUTHOR: James Newman
PUBLISHER: Routledge
URL: www.routledge.com
ISBN: 0-415281-92-X



Don't be fooled by the cover (which wouldn't look out of place on a 1983 issue of Your Spectrum). This is serious stuff, with Newman – proud holder of the first UK PhD in videogame culture – disassembling games like an expert mechanic. Designed as an introduction to those intending to study videogames academically, it really only scratches the surface – chapter two's discussion on what exactly *is* a game is page-turning stuff, but from there subjects such as gamers' behaviour, difficulty curves, cutscenes and space are swept off the page before they've had a chance to settle. But the chapter on videogame culture – and especially reaction to 'nu Celda' – is one of the only places to see the topic dealt with seriously and without getting bogged down in the mire of sub-issues like violence and gender. A good book before you tackle weightier tomes (and more passionately argued ideas) from the likes of Aarseth.

DUNGEONS & DREAMERS: THE RISE OF COMPUTER GAME CULTURE FROM GEEK TO CHIC

AUTHORS: Brad King & John Borland
PUBLISHER: Osborne
URL: www.osborne.com
ISBN: 0-072228-88-1



An oddly melancholy take on the computer side of game history – and specifically the curious rise of online gaming – from two accomplished technology writers. Garriott, Romero and Carmack are the heroes of the adventure that begins with *Adventure*, takes in MUD, *Doom* and *EverQuest*, and ends with Garriott attempting to create his own language. Early on, there are fascinating glimpses of an online future – Jez San is one of the MUD players fooled by 'Sue', a character who in reality turns out to be a fraudster from South Wales named Steve – and the authors take care to show gaming through the eyes of gamers as well as developers, albeit celebrity gamers like former *Quake* champ Dennis 'Thresh' Fong. Appropriately, Dungeons & Dreamers flits dreamily between topics and timezones – but it's uniquely placed to activate the nostalgia circuits of the PC crowd, and rich on tales from early virtual worlds such as *Ultima Online*. Including *that* naked protest.

VIDEO GAME BIBLE 1985-2002

AUTHOR: Andy Slaven et al
(OUT OF PRINT)
ISBN: 1-553697-31-6



The gospel according to Slaven and co is restricted to the 'neo-classics' of 1985 onwards (but not Sony's PlayStation, for some reason). Games are briefly rated and pricetagged, and scores of appalling factual errors are thrown in for free. (The Amiga CD32 met with 'great success' in England. Which part?)

GRAN TURISMO 4: DRIVING THE GAME

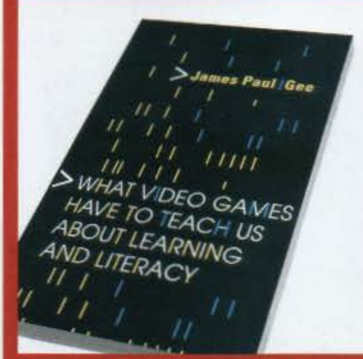
AUTHOR: Leo Hartas
PUBLISHER: Ilex
URL: www.ilex-press.com
ISBN: 0-761548-74-2



A cut above the usual behind-the-game fare, this peers under the bonnet of Polyphony Digital with the kind of attention of detail that's only appropriate for Kazunori Yamauchi's meticulous series. The 'Fast Cars' spreads are a waste of paper; the 120 pages positively gush with praise (the book is officially sanctioned). But access to the *GT* team is unprecedented.

WHAT VIDEOGAMES HAVE TO TEACH US ABOUT LEARNING AND LITERACY

AUTHOR: James Paul Gee
PUBLISHER: Palgrave Macmillan
URL: www.palgrave.com
ISBN: 1-403965-38-2



Like Got Game, this is an attempt to influence managers – in this case, the managers of classes full of schoolchildren – with a gimmicky videogame spin on essentially proven methods. But What Videogames Have... at least understands that videogames are 'inherently social', and the book starts with a solid premise – games *must* be adept at helping their audience learn, or everyone would be off doing something else instead. Whether Gee's methods are workable – he struggles to apply his '36 principles' to every aspect of classroom life – is debatable, but he's at least an endearing guide: having come to videogames late in life, you can feel his sense of wonder and horror as he chats with *EverQuest* addicts. (Gee has a follow-up book, Why Videogames Are Good For Your Soul, which examines the specific learning potential of 36 games.)

BEST OF THE REST

Books that believe there's life beyond videogames...

BACKROOM BOYS: THE SECRET RETURN OF THE BRITISH BOFFIN

AUTHOR: Francis Spufford
ISBN: 0-571214-97-5
Contains an excellently in-depth chapter on Braben and Bell's creation of *Elite*.

DIGITAL DIVERSIONS

AUTHOR: Julian Sefton-Green
ISBN: 1-857288-57-2
Youth culture in the age of the microchip, including a study of otaku.

DIGITAL GAME-BASED LEARNING

AUTHOR: Marc Prensky
ISBN: 0-071454-00-4
A practical guide to using the lessons of videogames to make people *learn*.

DIGITAL PLAY

AUTHOR: Steven Kline et al
ISBN: 0-773525-91-2
The greater importance of gaming; plus chapters on its history and culture.

HAMLET ON THE HOLODECK

AUTHOR: Janet H Murray
ISBN: 0-262631-87-3
Much-quoted paean to a supposed sparkling new age of digital narrative.

PAUSE & EFFECT: THE ART OF INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE

AUTHOR: Mark S Meadows
ISBN: 0-735711-71-2
Mildly pretentious beginner's guide to narrative, touching on *Ultima Online*.

THE PLAYFUL WORLD

AUTHOR: Mark Pesce
ISBN: 0-345439-43-0
How electronic toys and games are transforming our play – and the world.

PLAYING WITH POWER IN MOVIES, TELEVISION AND VIDEO GAMES

AUTHOR: Marscha Kinder
ISBN: 0-520077-76-8
A chapter on the NES's role in cognitive development and 'consumerist values'.

THE SINCLAIR STORY

AUTHOR: Rodney Dale
ISBN: 0-715619-01-2
Limited insight into Clive's computers (relevant chapters mostly available online).

An audience with...

Hideo Kojima





Meet possibly the only man who's ever been threatened with violence simply for wanting to make a new videogame...

ma

"People need a switch inside themselves (like the one on my watch) in order to feel renewed on the advent of a new day;" "Ever since I was a child, I have loved walking through the underground shopping center; I have never understood why. Especially in the morning, an almost poetic aura hangs about the environment due to the absence of a crowd;" "I use pens with lamé in the ink, the Sakura BallSign Tiara. My favorite colors are green, blue, orange, pink, and purple... When I use these pens, I affix 'the Seal of Kojima'!" Welcome to the world of **Hideo Kojima**, the man in charge of the *Metal Gear Solid* series (and more besides) at Konami. As you can tell, his is not the conventional face of contemporary game development, not even in Japan. But we're not meeting him today to talk timepieces, shopping or office stationery; we want to know more about the latest in his multimillion-selling espionage series, his views on new hardware, stealth in games, and more. First, though, there's a little bit of history to clear up...

When you finished *Metal Gear Solid 2* you said that you didn't want to work on another *Metal Gear*, and yet you produced a sequel, and now you're working on *MGS4*. What happened?

It happened in March in Germany for the European release of *MGS3*. I had other projects in mind. I knew that *MGS4* would eventually come out but I was very interested in making other games. I prepared *MGS4* with all the directions, designs, etc, and we had several meetings over three months and I came to the point where I was sure the project could go ahead without me. I mean, the staff had a great amount of experience with making the series so far. So I decided to go public with my decision during the event I was attending. Then it triggered an incredible reaction, starting on the web, then with phone calls and letters. They were all saying the same thing: I have to do it or it is not *MGS*. We have even been threatened. My staff got nervous with all these things going on – they were uneasy about taking on the development of *MGS4* without me. Konami felt the danger and after hearing several opinions I decided to do it. But now, I really don't want to do a *MGS5* so I went public again during the Tokyo Game Show. I really would like people to understand me. It is not that I hate *MGS*, not at all, but there are limits to what you can do in your lifetime. I need to do something different and I believe that would be better for the industry and Konami as well.



Not even the unveiling of one of PS3's most important titles affected Kojima's cheeky sense of humour, both *MGS4* trailers (E3 and TGS) poking fun at the characters and conventions of the series, its genre, and its more popular competitors



MGS3 was supposed to mark the end of a trilogy, so how did you decide to make a fourth instalment?

To me, the story ends with *MGS2* – but people were not satisfied with this. They wanted to know more, especially about the reasons some of the core plots have emerged. They were explained in *MGS3*. But then again, people asked me about stuff which was not entirely closed in *MGS2* – they'd say, what happened then to this or that? So *MGS4* will be the final answer to these remaining questions. The main theme is finished with the trilogy and *MGS4* is going to give an end to the characters' life. So in a sense *MGS4* is going to be the final part of the *MGS* story and most of the characters will be there, including Raiden, Octagon, Meryll, etc.

Each _MGS_ obviously takes a while to make – how do you think producing _MGS4_ on PS3 will affect production time?

You know, the development time for an *MGS* is not that long, actually. The problem is that a single team, Kojima Productions, is developing several games at the same time – *MGS4*, *MGS3: Subsistence*, *Boktai 3* and *MG Acid 2*. If you look at just *Subsistence*, this game is like what *Integral* was to *MGS1*, and it was developed in only a year with my team. But the more we work on all these projects, the more we get delayed on *MGS4*. I'd say *MGS4* would take two years to complete in total.

Didn't you fear that learning and exploiting the PS3 to its capacity would require more time than you might have planned?

Well, if I had to use the machine's power to the limit, yes, I think so. So you need to make choices. You have to put some limits on what you are going to do. If you don't, well, there is simply no end. I think that is the most difficult aspect of our work on *MGS4* for the moment. You don't need to make the game ultra-realistic because if you do so, you will feel a lot of problems about the game you are developing.

The message in _MGS4_'s trailer – 'This is no FPS. This is _MGS_' – is reinforcing the thirdperson format, right?

Well, you have the main camera in thirdperson configuration. There is no firstperson view. I want Snake to appear onscreen. I want the player to identify with this character rather than themselves.

Another message in the trailer implies that there's less stealth this time around. Is that the case?

Well, not really. In March, when I first spoke about *MGS4*, I wanted to say the word 'battlefield' but then I feared people would not understand its meaning, at least as I understand it for *MGS4*. Until now, you have had places inside the game where you could be 100 per cent safe. Plus, everybody was an enemy so you were sure about the nature of the people aroun[d] you. Now, there is uncertainty. The condition on the battlefield changes as buildings are destroyed, as soldiers make decisive actions over their enemies. So there is no certainly, no 100 per cent safe place. There is no way you could hide inside a box and stay there, safe.







Technically dazzling, cinematic and particularly drawn out, will the TGS trailer for *MGS4* prove uncannily illustrative of the final game's qualities? Based on past episodes, most probably



Solid Snake seems tired in the trailer, even ill at one point. Is _MGS4_ going to feature a more hardened view of war?

I want to feature a Snake who may not have the stamina he used to have but who still has his wil[l] to fight. But I realise that it would be no fun to control Snake if he had to be resting all the time

because of his condition. So I don't think his condition will influence the game controls.

The video features a Middle Eastern style of environment – is *MGS4* joining the ranks of games taking cues from the Iraq conflict?
With today's overseas FPS games, like *Black Hawk Down* or the recent *Battlefield 2*, you find a common, very Middle Eastern environment, and the passage in the video is like a parody of these games. The message was: "Hey, guy, *MGS* also went there." In the game, Snake will visit a variety of theatres [of war] and one will be in the Middle East. But when you play the game, you will understand it is as much about stealth as it is *MGS*. I chose to show this particular stage for the fun of it. I guess people had various reactions, like: "Don't you have any ideas left?" I guess they will be surprised if they took that video as an illustration of the entire game!

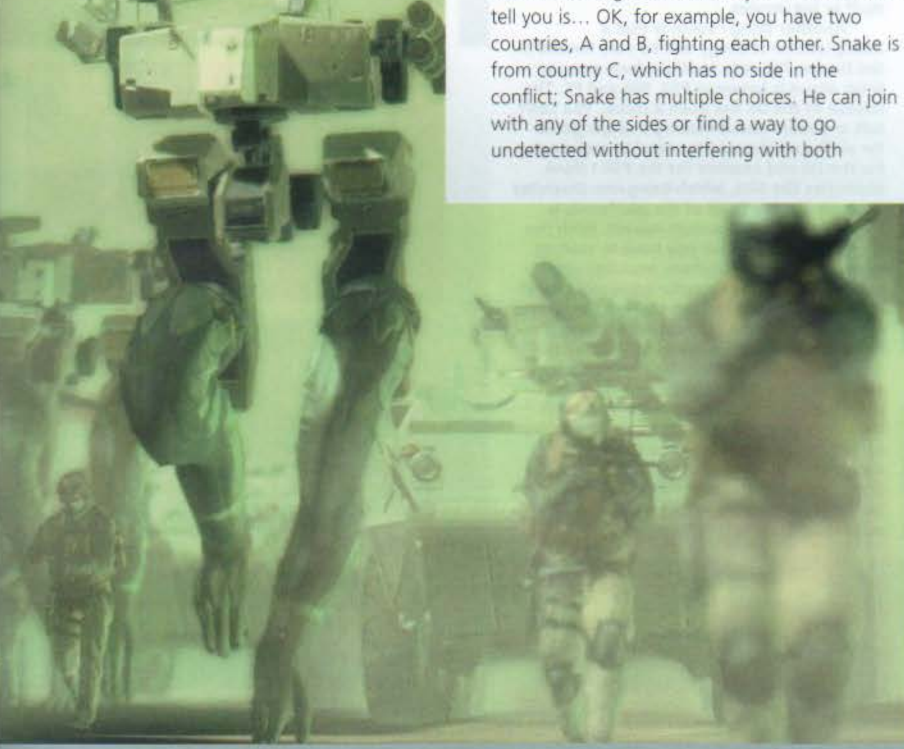
TITLE: **METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Is there anything you disliked in *MGS3* that you wanted to fix this time, or perhaps ideas that you wanted to develop further?
The camera has changed and it is now very similar to the one we designed for *Subsistence*. As for the camouflage, it has been changed in *MGS4*. I can't get into details yet but what I can tell you is… OK, for example, you have two countries, A and B, fighting each other. Snake is from country C, which has no side in the conflict; Snake has multiple choices. He can join with any of the sides or find a way to go undetected without interfering with both countries. Of course, siding with one side means you become the enemy of the other. You can even take on both and become their common enemy. The camouflage does not work like in *MGS3*, using the environment; instead you will use it like tags to simulate a type of uniform, for instance. So the word 'camouflage' may not be appropriate. As for capturing food, we are still working on it. I mean, you would just need to steal food from the enemy as *MGS4* is about a battlefield, not a hunting ground.



Though some of *MGS4*'s environments look reminiscent of those explored in other games, Kojima is keen to point out that we shouldn't lump this in with the likes of *Black Hawk Down*

"Improved graphics are not sufficient. There is no fun in trying to make incredible CG"



Naturally, speculation is rife as to the truth behind Snake's appearance in *MGS4*. Kojima has previously pointed out that, being a clone of Big Boss, Snake ages more quickly than you'd expect, making the new game's precise position in the series' timeline even more difficult to extrapolate from what we've been shown thus far



Can you actually play the game without fighting any of the sides in the conflict?
It is not that simple. According to the theatre, you have different sides fighting. One would feature A against B, another would put A against C, then B against C, A against D, etc. Moreover, you could have one battlefield opposing A, B and C or one could feature only one side. The user will be free to deal with the situation on these battlefields. Now imagine that side A spot you and mistakenly fire at you as they think you are the enemy. If you return fire, then you are at war with them. Looking at the ongoing action, B will think you are an ally and may help you. You could even be rewarded as a hero, etc. However, it is not on a scale of the entire theatre. These situations are taking place on a micro level. I would like the tactical situation in a theatre to be influenced by the actions of the player. I would also like one theatre to have an impact on another according to the choices made. Imagine one theatre should have opposed A and B but thanks to Snake's actions in favour of B in the previous stage, the theatre would in fact feature almost exclusively B.

The small robot in the video comes from *Snatcher* – are you reviving that, too?
Oh, no, please! I have so many original projects to do!



KOJIMA ON COOKING

Asked for his take on the next-gen landscape, Kojima says: "I like to compare the new consoles to cooking. PS3 will be an anniversary, a very unique occasion where you serve a very gorgeous dinner, maybe once or twice a year. You would need to dress properly and buy a bottle of champagne. The 360 is a special dinner you are enjoying out, at the weekend. The Revolution is the dinner served every day at home. I think they are all delicious but it depends on the cost and how you are enjoying them – like who you are inviting to the dinner, etc. However, I believe there is a separation between the PS3, the 360 and the PC, which together form one group, and the Revolution, which forms a second group. I think it is very important to aim at greater processing power and graphics, although still focusing exclusively in these areas is a problem. Yes, they are essential for the industry, but on the other hand, the Revolution is focused on the fun, basing its design on the controller. The PS3, 360 and PC are simulators, aiming at doing the same stuff as big movies.

"Another thing I sense is that a multiplatform strategy will be very limited in the future. The only multiplatform you can think about is between PS3, 360 and PC. The release of the DS has been a shock. You can't talk any more about making a single game for all the platforms. You need to make one for the DS and another for the PSP. I think strategies like EA's, which bring one character or movie licence to all of the platforms, is meaningless in the current market. With the DS and the Revolution you have to start to think about the controllers, meaning you need to find a way to make enjoyable use of it. I would not like to start to from the licence – like: "OK, we need to make *MGS* for the Revolution." I believe we need to think the opposite way. The Revolution will be a test for creators who have been making games since the age of the 8bit Famicom. We will see how many will actually be able to deliver something creative using the controller. Conversely, the high-end platforms tend to test the visuals, the audio and the use of technology to create entertainment. So it's no longer just about videogames."







OK, what's proving to be the most difficult aspect of developing *MGS4*?
I would say the part you don't necessarily see. Until now, nothing really changed. Improved graphics are not sufficient. There is no fun in trying to make incredible CG. The original PlayStation brought us 3D but the PS2 did not bring anything new, just better graphics. You could say it introduced the network but this feature never really succeeded. Now with the PS3, it is the same, nothing really changed. Graphics improved. I see the making of a game on these platforms as making sets, like the background of a movie. You always make greater and bigger sets, but you know that behind these sets, there is nothing. If we continue like this, nothing is going to happen. So in order to aim at a greater level, we need to build worlds and not sets. But on the PS3, you still need to deliver great graphics. The video at the TGS was made with all these ideas in mind. I know that we can do better than the graphics featured in the video but that has never been my objective. I think we have good visual quality right now, and I would like to use the rest of the power on things that are not apparent. Our challenge is to achieve what we want to do.



"I see making games on PS3 as making sets, like the background of a movie"

While other development departments within Konami are happy to buy in middleware, Kojima's team is creating its own rendering tech for *MGS4*. It's certainly going to be busy



Did you start from scratch on this *MGS* or have you been able to recycle any assets from the previous game?
We almost did everything from scratch. We reused very few things. I have to say that we have a very specific way of working. Yes, my team is quite special. So special that we could not work like other companies – purchasing a 3D engine licence, for instance. We realised that in doing so, we would lose lots of speed in the game because of the way the game is developed. So we had to do everything from scratch, even the rendering engine.

Gamers often say they want originality, but when it comes it can frighten them off, and they fall back on what they know. Do you think it's difficult to sell originality?
Indeed, users are not really excited by buying original content. It looks as if they don't really search for new experiences. I believe this is also true for the movie industry or even books. They prefer well-known licences or sequels – things they know. I tried to introduce originality throughout the *MGS* series but I understand that people only see the *MGS* experience as a game series.

Do you think a game creator needs to have a famous name to have an original game optioned nowadays?
You know, when I presented *Boktai*, I was told it would never work. So I don't think it is a question of name. I think it is a question of how the company works and how the producer pushes his idea. Even when I presented *MGS*



Though Kojima couldn't resist making a nod towards *Snatcher* in the occasionally restrained *Metal Gear Solid 4* video, there are no plans to revive the property any time soon, sadly



for the first time, people were very sceptical. So the creator needs to be very strong and skilled in making the company believe that this game is going to sell.

Some creators of well-known properties have had difficulty moving beyond their most famous creations – George Lucas, for example. What about you and *MGS*?

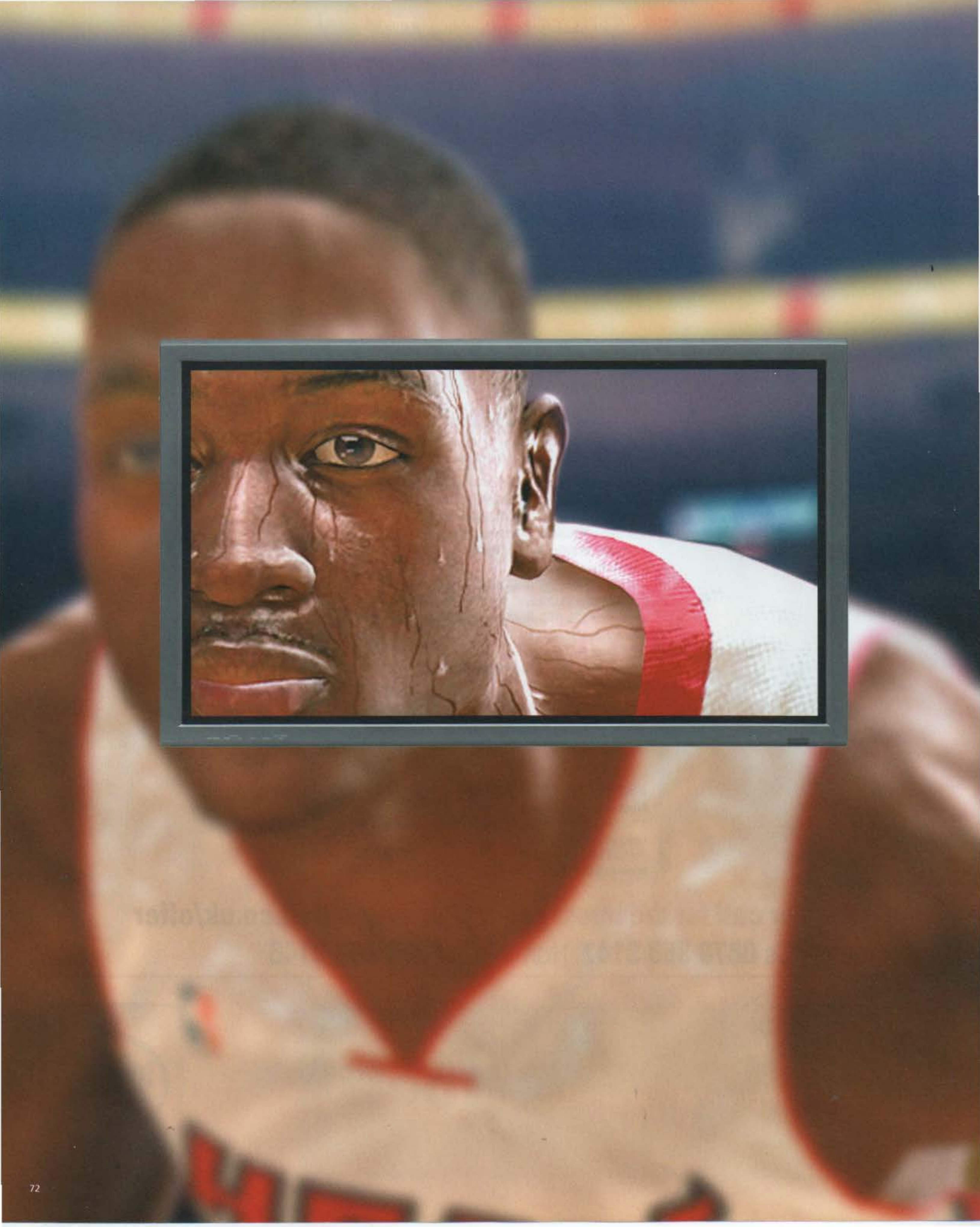
I guess people who love one creation will continue to stick to it, but in my case I really want to do other things. I'm 42 and that means I have ten years left to do what I want, and this idea makes me feel very anxious. I don't hate *MGS*. I really love it, but it is only a small part of who I am. I want to express other aspects and share other experiences I find fun. I have tons of ideas, but the game must sell if I want to continue. There are three parameters I have to consider: things I want to do, the ones which will sell, and the things we can do with today's technology. For a game to sell, there are many important aspects such as the world you create, the visuals you deliver and your timing. A game may sell just because it arrived on the market at the right time. My preferences also change with time, so a game I used to want to make would not interest me today. Technology also dictates if a game can be done or not. *Boktai* was possible because at that time the technology was available. There are also the developer's skills to consider – even if he wants to make a game,it will be impossible if he hasn't got the right skills. I have tons of ideas, but not much time to consider them, especially with all these other games I have to do.

What about Nintendo's Revolution?

That's one platform I would like to work on, but I need time to consider all the ways the different features can be used. On Revolution, I really would like to design a game, direct it and produce it. But ultimately it's about having a game that sells, meaning it appeals enough to users so they buy it. For a company, this means making choices, because resources are limited.

Do you think Japan is putting too much effort into selling games overseas? Is there are danger that it's losing some of its specific cultural qualities?

I feel it is the opposite. I think developers are making too many games for the Japanese market. Look at the character designs for instance – they are all the same. I find it quite disappointing. Today you have so many influences pouring into Japan from overseas – movies, music, comics, etc... Japan is a country that should be enjoying such a situation. I think as a Japanese person it is important to understand the Japanese and overseas influences and mix them in my creations. I don't see the point of making a game based on Tokyo. I mean, what is fun about playing in an environment you are living and working in? I would prefer playing in bigger environments and having a greater adventure instead.

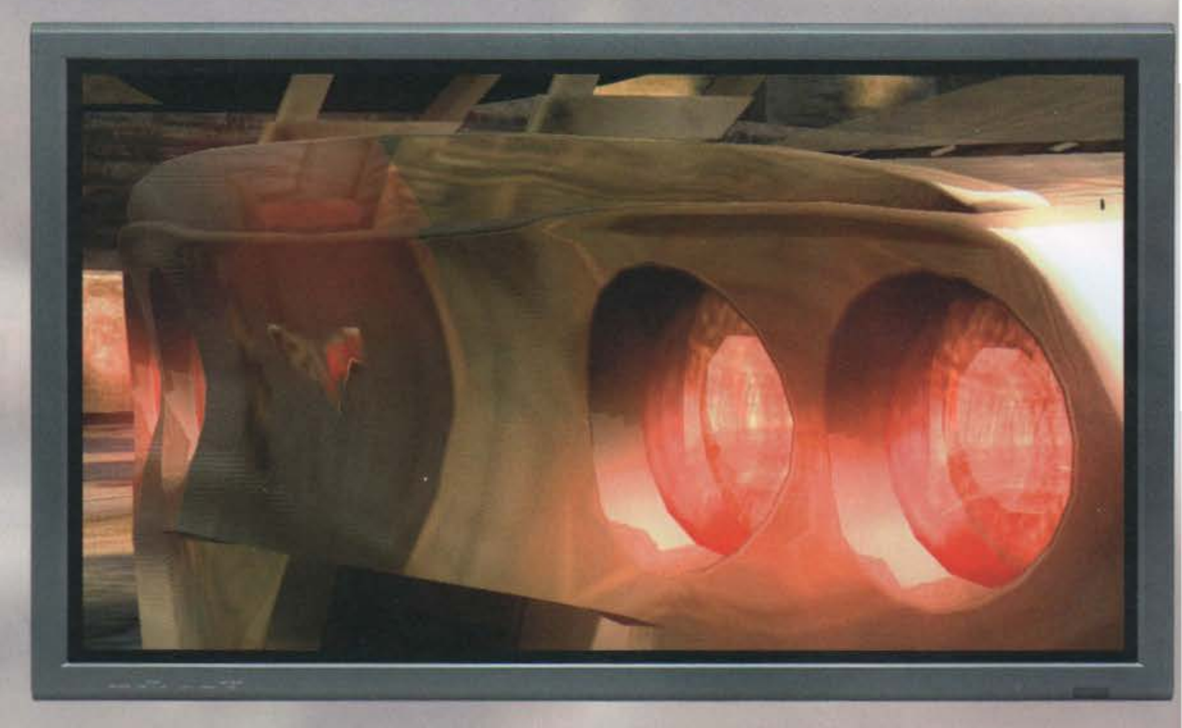


HD: DEFINED

THE LAST THING YOU'D EXPECT TO NEED MORE OF WITH THE HIGH-DEFINITION ERA IS CLARITY, BUT IT STILL NEEDS SOME EXPLAINING...

For a TV to be considered HD Ready, it has to support the resolutions 480i/p, 576i/p, 720p and 1080i (see 'New tier resolutions'), in addition to supporting a picture ratio of 16:9 – that of a conventional widescreen set. To add further complication, the first two of those resolutions aren't actually considered HDTV, but are rather EDTV (Enhanced Definition Television). An unwritten part of the HD standard further suggests HDMI support to be an essential feature of a compliant set, because without it you'll be lost upon the arrival of HDCP (High-bandwidth Digital Content Protection). Be sure, also, to consider the impact of 1080p – the additional resolution championed by PlayStation 3 that's also classifiably HD, but isn't actually supported by the majority of HDTVs. And then there's the native resolution of whichever...

Enough, already. Believe it or not, we still occupy a plug-and-play marketplace, but as you can see, the art of plugging two things together and actually having them play something is set to become quite arcane. Microsoft urges consumers to descend upon online retailers and high street stores in pursuit of 360-friendly televisions, and Sony blithely dangles a carrot that even those products can't reach. Is the industry mad? Inconsiderate? Not quite: try agitated. HD will happen (Sky officially launches its HD service next year; the US effectively kills analogue broadcasting in 2009), and no one wants to be left looking soft while others become crisp. The market may not be ready, but we have to be if we're to avoid that insufferable sensation of enjoying only half the experience we've had sold to us. Whether you like it or not, that all



starts this month. Time certainly flew by, didn't it?

For gamers, in particular, things are going to get messy. What you have to consider with HDTV is that it provides a crystal-clear depiction of *everything* it receives. The amount of visual junk your old consoles spit out and which your existing CRT neatly sweeps under the carpet would, and indeed will, surprise you. But let's start at the shallow end, with the tailored pristine visuals J Allard has long evangelised and which Xbox 360 can now produce. If you're thinking of the 'high definition' images put out by the progressive scan mode of PS2 and GameCube games, forget those – they're not HD as it stands today. An Xbox connected through a High Definition AV pack to an existing HDTV is closer, and in a select few cases (games that make use of the machine's highest resolutions), that's it. For those unfamiliar with any of the above, disregard it and know simply that for Xbox 360 gaming, what counts is 720p.

At this resolution, visuals are being produced at roughly the same fidelity as would befit the average 19-inch PC flat panel, albeit in a widescreen ratio and dolled up with the glossy new hardware effects of a next-generation console. With 1080i offering little, if any, visual improvement and 1080p shrouded in uncertainty, this is the guaranteed face of the HD era, at least as far as Microsoft is concerned. The inevitable question, then: just how much does PS3 complicate matters with its potentially greater requirements? At E3 Sony delighted in exerting numerical superiority over its competitor, but is a 1080p future a realistic enough prospect to give consumers cause for concern?

Together with brute horsepower, the textural and geometric detail required by such 1920x1080 games would be quite simply incredible, especially when introduced to the fast-motion scenes that are common among console games. Even if this doesn't prove too steep a challenge for developers already strained by next-gen staffing demands and timetables, it's unlikely that the difference between 1080p and 720p will be nearly as striking as the initial jump from standard definition to HD. Ultimately, as ever, the buy-now/buy-later decision will hinge on individual perspectives: many will maintain that there'll always be something better on the horizon and that the advent of widespread HD generally is a worthier milestone than the arrival of 1080p. If the next few years indeed see the continued dominance of 720p, will it even be the case that sets with a higher native resolution prove *less* desirable than those being advertised now?

Stop. Rewind. Let's climb on top of things again and discuss the notion of native resolution. Unlike that of conventional CRTs, the technology present in most HDTVs will dictate one specific resolution at which their image will be displayed purely and precisely.

NEW TIER RESOLUTIONS

In terms of its technical concerns and jargon, HD blurs the line between modern PC monitors and standalone televisions. Put plain and simply, here are the basics you need to know:

- **An interlaced image consists of odd and even fields of lines drawn in quick succession – half of the screen is drawn during one refresh, the other half the next**
- **A progressive image is displayed as lines drawn from top to bottom in sequence, the result being a more stable overall picture**
- **720p draws a progressive image at a resolution of 1280x720 pixels**
- **1080i draws an interlaced image at 1920x1080 pixels. Because of the interlacing, the true vertical resolution is actually lower than it seems, resulting in a picture that is arguably worse than that of 720p**
- **1080p draws a progressive image, again 1920x1080**



It's something owners of recent TVs are already familiar with, but the HD era's arrival is set to make widescreen 16:9 the norm. The 4:3/16:9 difference is shown above

Anything above or below must be upscaled or downscaled to suit, meaning that a set with a native resolution of 1280x720 is ideal (or as close to it as you'll get) for displaying 720p. It isn't a major concern when dealing with an HD image: the inbuilt scaler of one HDTV will differ in quality from another, but to an almost indiscernible degree when dealing with small increments. Strangely enough, though, the most common current examples of conflicting resolutions involve the most desirable sets, 1366x768 being the native resolution of many a top-rated model.

So beyond the requisite of 720p compatibility, the range of supported resolutions you choose to pursue for your

new TV is largely a question of preference, and one that should really pose few problems provided you have an HD signal going in. The issues surrounding the treatment of SD consoles by HD sets, however, will be applicable to just about anyone who chooses to plug their older machines into their new display.

Unless you're prepared to have a CRT lying around, cabling (specifically cable quality) will be a major determinant of standard-definition picture quality in the HD era. Unsurprisingly, the cables considered best in the current generation will enjoy similar popularity in the next, though there's uncertainty as to whether S-Video or RGB comes out on top. The former has traditionally (on Xbox, at least) produced a harsher-edged image than the latter, but RGB SCART can reveal a surprising amount of cross-hatching and colour bleed on HDTVs – something it's traditionally been known to avoid. Remember, also, that the cries of next-gen developers regarding texture resolution aren't without just cause – what looks basic in hindsight looks doubly so in HD. Considering the availability of superior external upscalers, you need to ask yourself whether an optimum picture is important enough to warrant additional expense.

The problem is that not even the most expensive cables will eliminate the inherent blur of a badly deinterlaced image. Whenever an HDTV receives a signal at odds with its native resolution, it has to convert the image itself. If that process merely involves scaling an already progressive image from one resolution to another, it can typically be achieved quickly enough to avoid any noticeable lag. Deinterlacing an image (typically from 480i to 480p prior to upscaling), however, is a more demanding proposition. Few televisions are constructed with fast-moving videogames in mind, and thus feature internal processors optimised for high image quality rather than fast processing speed. The result, in most cases, is noticeable lag. The ideal solution to your past-generation concerns is therefore to deinterlace and upscale the intended image prior to it reaching your HDTV – something that'll involve a standalone upscaler such as the Micomsoft XRGB2+. Available for approximately £150, the XRGB2+ accepts RGB, Composite, S-Video and Japanese D-Terminal input (essentially Component but with a different plug), and outputs a VGA signal ideal for display on HDTV. Moreover, the box features separate audio inputs for each incoming video signal, making it a convenient switcher between different consoles. Configuring its finer settings, however, can be somewhat trickier than simply connecting the respective inputs to the box. An internet search for more in-depth guidance is therefore the recommended course of action.

RGB SCART CAN REVEAL A SURPRISING AMOUNT OF COLOUR BLEED ON HDTV

BOX CLEVER

The shop assistant's standing there waiting for your questions – he probably won't know the answers, but at least you can check off the following on the product guide attached to the set:

MINIMUM REQUIRED:
- **720p support (Xbox 360)**
- **HDMI interface (with HDCP support)**
- **Component interface**

RECOMMENDED:
- **Latency/refresh rate of 8ms (LCD only)**
- **Contrast ratio of 800:1 (LCD) or at least 5,000:1 (plasma)**
- **Older standard interfaces such as RGB and S-Video**

OPTIONAL:
- **1080p support (to ensure optimum display of PlayStation 3 titles)**
- **DVI interface (ideal for PC connectivity)**
- **VGA interface (suitable alternative for Xbox 360 video, good for current consoles with VGA box)**

It's worth stressing that the only current-generation system to which the interlacing issue significantly applies is PS2 (specifically that majority of games which don't output a progressive signal). The vast majority of GameCube titles, conversely, will output in progressive via Component cables, as of course will original Xbox games. Dreamcast, furthermore, is capable of outputting a VGA signal via the appropriate lead.

Faced with the above concerns (and indeed with those still to come in this rundown), there'll probably come a time when you despair with the minute details and head for your local retailer for a hopefully convincing demo. As a testament to how wholly unprepared retailers are for the HD era, however, the majority of high street stores will be unable (or unwilling) to hook up a true HD source to their demonstration sets. Instead, you'll typically be treated to something as bad as a shared SCART or even RF signal – utterly pointless considering an HDTV's harsh treatment of an imperfect input. For a fruitful hands-on, it's best to ask a local specialist store if you can



LCD (LIQUID CRYSTAL DISPLAY)

TYPICAL PRICES: £300 (17"), £750 (26"), £1,400 (32")

Already familiar to an increasing number of PC owners, LCD flatpanel displays are the current darling of consumers and retailers alike. One of their greatest advantages over plasma technology is the larger array of HD resolutions they accommodate at equivalent screen sizes, the majority of current 32-inch sets offering everything up to 720p – the favoured resolution of Xbox 360 – and 1080i. Essentially identical in core technology to their PC counterparts, they've enjoyed the same progression in terms of black reproduction (older sets notably offered a much greyer interpretation) and viewing angle. Latency – traditionally the cause of ghosting in games – has been greatly reduced over the years. To be on the safe side, ask for the refresh rate of your prospective LCD when shopping around – if it's 16ms or less you'll be fine, though 8ms is preferable.

Calibration, on the other hand, is a major LCD concern, the ghastliness of the default settings being demonstrated at X05. The process of acquiring the optimum image can take anything up to two hours. Aids such as Digital Video Essentials (a calibration DVD available online) and the THX Optimizer (found on many DVD movies) can quicken the procedure.



PLASMA

TYPICAL PRICES: £1,500 (36"), £2,000 (42"), £3,500 (50")

In a plasma screen, every pixel is composed of three subpixels, between them corresponding to the colours red, green and blue. Inert gas reacts with phosphors in each to produce coloured light of the same intensity as that seen in a standard CRT TV. The significance for gamers is that plasma screens run to larger sizes than LCD while maintaining a comparable depth of approximately three inches, becoming more cost effective as the screen diagonal goes up.

As for the belief that the gas within a plasma display will need recharging at some point during its lifetime: this is actually a myth, the consumption of gas during operational hours being so small that it should never pose a problem. Similarly, while longevity has been cited as an overall issue, plasmas still have a considerable life expectancy: at least three years and three months of all-day use. The lamp in an LCD will last little longer, and may cost more than the price of the TV itself to replace. Fragility is plasma's biggest concern, the weighty sets favouring specialist delivery and installation, with factors such as their increased heat output also requiring consideration. A still image can also 'burn in' to a plasma if left for too long, but lately the risk has been greatly reduced.



MICRODISPLAYS

TYPICAL PRICES: £1,300 (42"), £2,000 (50")

Rear projection has long been regarded as a means of cheaply obtaining huge televisions at the expense of overall picture quality, but a new generation looks to change that. There are a number of variants within this bracket, but all share the same basic technology: a lamp bounces light off or through a pixel-filled microchip to project an image forward to the screen.

Without plunging into the technicalities of each, the current favourite for gamers is DLP (Digital Light Processor) technology, which should be clearly indicated on the set's outer casing. Nearly every DLP-based set since 2004 has boasted a native resolution of 1280x720 – perfect for 720p images. More expensive 1080i-capable models have also appeared, but at a notably higher price point. LCD projection-based sets are viable alternatives that continue to improve with time – the difference in picture quality between them and DLP being barely noticeable. Something to consider, however, is that DLP commonly employs a spinning internal colour wheel – a reported cause of headaches and anomalous 'rainbow effects'. LCD projection, on the other hand, can display a faint grid of overlaid pixels if viewed too closely, known as the 'screen door effect'.



test your new 360 with a properly calibrated set. Take a close look to ensure the picture is suitably inspiring, try out different ambient light conditions and, ideally, a variety of game genres that represent different visual tones and degrees of motion. The generic factors you need to consider are contrast ratio (the brightest level of a given image in comparison to the darkest), the reproduction of black (as opposed to grey), the quality of the picture when viewed from different angles, and any discrepancies (such as ghosting) that appear while playing.

As you can tell from the technology descriptions above, you can expect to encounter different issues with each of the options available. Every technological recommendation has its caveat and, to complicate matters, each respective set has its own idea of how best to remedy it. Dynamic Contrast, for instance, is a feature you'll find in one form or other on many newer sets. But despite the claims (on LCD at least) of a threefold increase in contrast ratio, remember that this is post-processing rather than genuine capability – the perfect incoming image is being doctored by the TV, which makes a loss of important detail inevitable. The harsh and somewhat inevitable truth regarding HDTV is that there are few easy answers. Furthermore, even the most comprehensive checklist won't anticipate your individual criteria – the dimensions of your house, for example.

Viewing distance is a more important consideration for high-definition sets than CRT users might expect. Sit too close to a traditional set and the worst you're likely to see are scanlines thanks to its low resolution; do the same with an HDTV and every discrepancy (whether rainbow effect, screen door effect, stuck pixel or other) makes itself known. Gone are the days when the largest set was the most desirable, unless of course your living room or bedroom has the size to match. The rough guide is as follows: for standard-definition images you should ensure a distance of three times the diagonal screen

PROTECT YOUR INVESTMENT

HDMI is perceived by many as being the best means of displaying a high-definition source on HDTV, making Microsoft's decision to omit this interface from Xbox 360 an initially baffling one. One unconfirmed theory is that 360 employs an analogue scaler, which would make conversion to a digital signal purely for the benefit of improved connectivity somewhat pointless. But HDMI *will* be supported (doubly, in fact) by PlayStation 3, and should be an imperative in your search for a new set thanks to HDCP. With TV networks and movie distributors agreed that digital is key to the fight against piracy, HD broadcasts are set to universally incorporate this encryption method as soon as it can be arranged.

GONE ARE THE DAYS WHEN SIMPLY THE LARGEST SET WAS MOST DESIRABLE

PROJECTORS
TYPICAL PRICE: £600-£2,500

The advent of DLP technology has transformed the capability of front projectors, allowing for crystal-clear, particularly vivid images to be projected at mammoth sizes. It's entirely possible to achieve a stunning wall-sized picture simply by projecting on to the wall itself, though dropdown and mounted screens will ensure a consistent image. There are inevitable concerns: lamp life is typically 2,000-3,000 hours (with replacements costing over £100) and permanent installation requires significant planning. Lamps also generate intense heat, which means that adequate space and careful handling are essential. Surprisingly, however, the latest projectors remain viewable even in brightly lit environments (albeit to a lesser degree than you'd prefer).

As with the majority of modern HD equipment, projectors commonly display resolutions of 720p (1280x720), with 1080p support steadily increasing. HDMI support is gradually being introduced, while DVI, VGA and component inputs are widely accommodated. Be warned, however, because the advertised resolutions of many projectors are often at odds with their actual natives, meaning that while the projector will happily display the details of its input signal, in truth it's downscaling that image to a lower resolution, often to a sub-HD spec. As with any purchase, furthermore, it's crucial you ensure that all of the connections you're likely to require are supported. A sufficiently sized room is also essential for a larger projected image, and there's no denying that a conventional TV solution is universally simpler and more versatile. But the advantages speak for themselves – a projected game of *PGR3* or *FEAR*, for example, is a momentous experience.



CRT (CATHODE RAY TUBE)
TYPICAL PRICE: £800 (30")-£1,200 (34")

Perhaps not the first choice that comes to mind when contemplating HD, the traditional CRT remains a contender, at least in the US. The advantages and disadvantages have long been common knowledge: picture quality is good, viewing angle is excellent, ambient lighting is seldom a problem (unless in direct sunlight), and lifespan is long. Conversely, it's probable that the physical size of so-called Direct View CRTs will ultimately spell their doom.

There's no particularly convincing reason for a UK consumer to choose the HD CRT route (unlike the US, they're neither cheap nor widely available here). Should you choose to do so, you can expect to be dealing with an online importer at inevitable additional cost and inconvenience. It's still true that none of the existing HD technologies are perfect, but the wiser choice for those not wishing to make a switch is surely to wait for 1080p to become a more supported standard, by which time the likes of LCD, plasma and rear projection will have again made progress in overcoming their various flaws. Alternatively, the fact that the market already abounds with HD solutions doesn't preclude another from joining them in the near future.



COMING SOON
PRICES: TBA

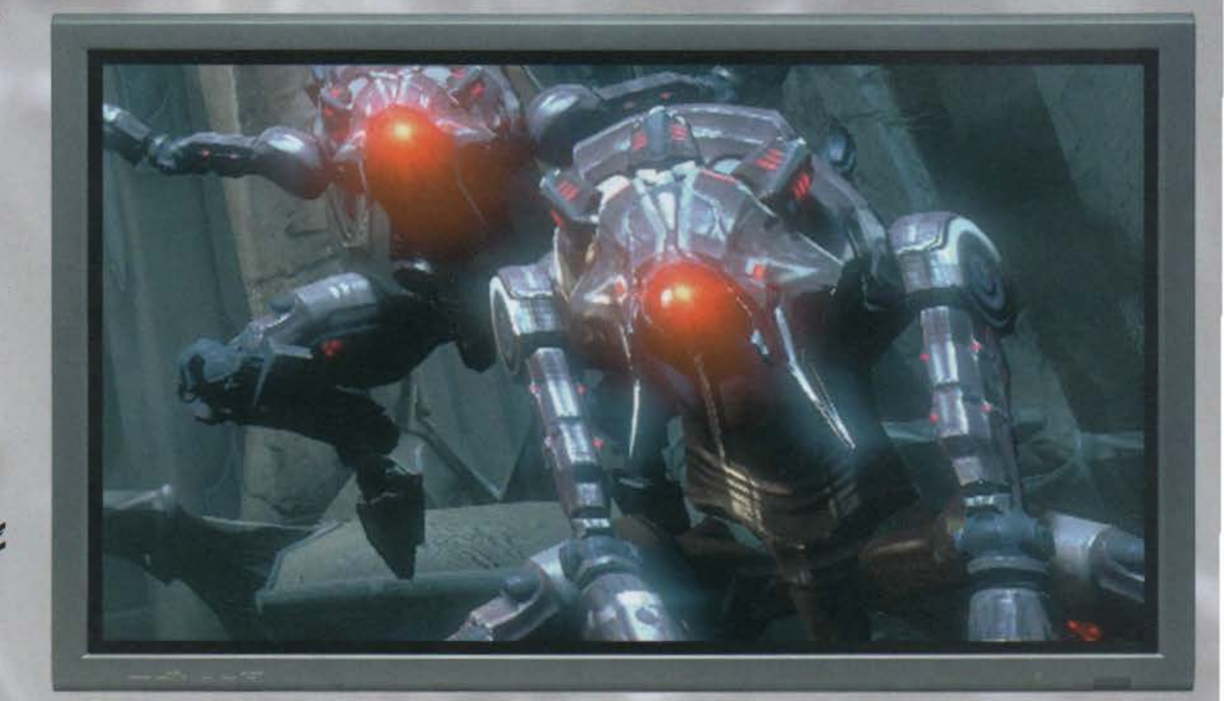
As if deciding on one of today's latest, significantly expensive televisions wasn't enough of a quandary for you, try taking the sets of tomorrow (by which we mean next year) into consideration. Scheduled for initial availability in March 2006 and mass production in 2007 is the first of Toshiba's SED (Surface-Conduction Electron-Emitter Display) products, boasting an initial screen size of 50 inches, low power consumption, 1080p support and a 100,000:1 contrast ratio – some 100 times higher than that of a current LCD and ten times higher than a top-of-the-line plasma. The sets are no thicker than today's flat panels and, significantly, draw blacks as blacks rather than dark greys. Many pundits consider this to be the first example of HDTV done properly, though the initial price is certain to match those expectations.

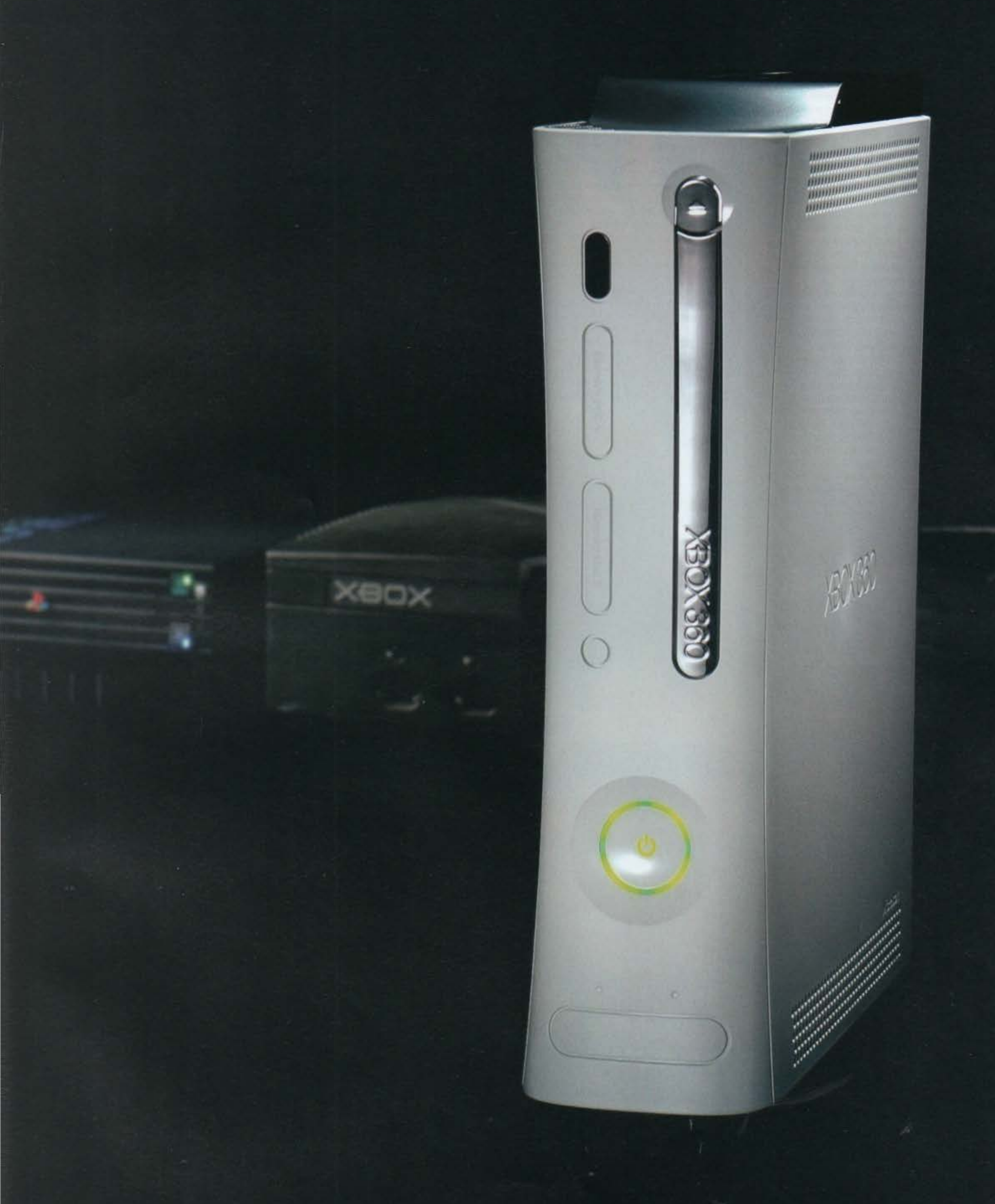
Elsewhere, though introduced back in 2003, Sony's SXRD (Silicon X-Tal Reflective Display) technology will increasingly challenge DLP projection. Initially powering in its Qualia range of front projectors, the LCD-based system has since formed the basis of a new range of microdisplays that include the 70-inch Grand Wega, offering 1080p and a contrast level that lies between that of LCD and plasma.



size, while for high-definition images such as those of Xbox 360, two times the same measurement is required. For the average room, this most likely suggests 26-32 inches.

Of course, you may have decided already that there's simply too much complexity and uncertainty in the HDTV market right now to justify the purchase of such expensive equipment. A year ago, you might not have even considered the prospect of a new television, let alone the supposed need for one. Next year, similarly, we may already be discussing a more refined generation of sets (see 'Coming soon') as we come to terms with whatever Revolution and PS3 bring to the table. But at least find time to check out the HD era for yourself in one form or other, because regardless of any scepticism you might have, this is still a milestone in the visual evolution of games that will catch up with everyone eventually.




XBOX
XBOX 360
XBOX 360

FIRST OF THE NEXT GENERATION

XBOX 360 IS HERE. TIME, THEN, TO TAKE THE HARDWARE FOR A SPIN

There's nothing like the anticipation surrounding a new console. In Xbox 360's case, there really is nothing quite like it. Just four years ago, Microsoft had no presence, and no credibility, in console gaming. Now its machine dominates the online world, and sets the agenda for such crucial cash cows as the FPS and racing genres. Year on year, the Xbox stretches its legs, and is only beginning to meet its full potential. The 360 may be an exciting new machine, but it's not answering any desperate need: Xbox users are still sitting on the most powerful videogame console available, playing some of the finest games ever made.

And yet it was impossible not to anticipate, especially since the 360 didn't just promise something better, it promised something *more*. A multimedia hub, downloadable arcade games, online spectator mode, high-definition visuals, wireless integration – all on top of the usual promises of prettier, faster, longer. And now, arguably before it should ever have begun, the anticipation is over. The 360 is here, and it has an unusually long list of promises to deliver on.

Foremost – at least as you slide it out of the box – is the look. After press conferences and design lectures to explain the east-meets-west, intake-of-breath theory of the 360's fashion-conscious design, how does it sit in your living room? There's no one answer to that, it turns out. Stand it artfully on end, next to a sleek flat-panel TV, and it looks elegant and slender. But, as many suspected from the dearth of horizontal press shots, dump it unceremoniously flat on top of an Xbox and it becomes immediately obvious that it's not much smaller, and it quickly loses the impact of its subtle curves. The colour, too, depends a lot on its surroundings. At best it looks cool and neutral, at worst beige and blocky. The faceplates – well-built and highly detailed, as they ought to be for £15 – dramatically transform the look of the console, but work best head on. From the side the result, particularly with



textured finishes like the wood effect, can be a little disconcerting.

It's a handsome machine, nonetheless, even if it doesn't quite have the heavyweight heft of the original Xbox. That difference, of course, is partly down to the very large (and warm) power supply which some will curse, but which obviously keeps the machine cooler and slimmer. It, along with the supplied cables, carries on the Xbox tradition of being very high quality. Elements of the machine's finish, however, don't quite match that standard. The power button, specifically designed to be as alluring as possible, feels a little vague, and the eject switch is plasticky. The drive itself also has quite a substantial impact on the impression the machine makes: although the fans are comparatively quiet, disc access is obtrusive and persistently noisy. (It's worth noting, of course, that components like disc drives are replaced with different models throughout a console's lifespan, so it's possible that this will improve in later 360 versions.) The hard drive, slotted neatly on to the top of the machine, clips easily in and out, although again the release button isn't quite as solid in operation as you'd hope.

With the controllers, however, there are no cons, only pros. The sticks are a clear step up from even the Xbox's own: accurate and grippy, they encourage skilled and sensitive play. The triggers are softer and shallower than before, which actually increases the level (and comfort) of analogue control. The two additional shoulder buttons are, unsurprisingly, much more useful in play than the awkward compromise of the old black and white buttons. The D-pad, sadly, is only a slight improvement on the vagueness of the original, and the new placement of the Start and Back buttons will make obvious sense once you stop automatically reaching for their old spots. The only dark spot lies in the wires with the controller in the Core pack. The wireless dream was one of the most seductive aspects of the 360's vision, and to still be tethered to the console is a small but disappointing compromise. Adding frustration to that small injury is the fact that the cables, though generously long, are annoyingly prone to snarls. As things stand, if you invest in extra wired controllers (around £25) you'll be limited to three players since there are only three USB ports. Clearly, wireless controllers (around £33) don't suffer that restriction, but can't be directly recharged through the 360 unless you invest in a further Plug 'n' Play pack (around £15, with additional rechargeable battery packs for extra controllers at around £10). Microsoft has previously shown a



INSERT POINT TO PLAY

Even before Xbox 360 officially launches, Xbox Live Arcade has already substantially evolved from its Xbox testbed. Now fully integrated into the dashboard, rather than needing a separate disk to run, the range of games it offers represents the same eclectic mix of retro emulations, shareware PC titles and offputtingly hardcore shooters. The retro flag, for now, is mostly being flown by Midway, with accurate conversions of *Gauntlet*, *Joust*, *Robotron 2084* and *Smash TV*. Each can be bought for 400 points (£3.40), and offer familiar pleasures with the added fillip of Live play.

The PC conversions are led by the all-conquering *Bejewelled* (800, £7.80), still oddly one of the less charismatic versions of the gem-swapping game, despite its popularity. *Zuma* (800 points), the other standard bearer of Microsft's MSN Gaming Zone, is also on offer if you fancy a slightly more *Bubble Bobble* tinge to your gem-busting experience. A range of more grown-up pleasures – Backgammon, Hearts and Billiards (800 each) – is also available, produced with the accomplished sterility you'd expect from high-quality PC download games. The quirkier side of things is represented by *Outpost Kaloki X* (800), a venerable space-based tycoon game, and *Marble Blast Ultra*, an elegantly put-together mix of *Super Monkey Ball*, *Marble Madness* (800) and *Archer Maclean's Mercury*. Best of the bunch is *Wik* (800), winner of this year's independent game festival at GDC. Ingeniously reworked to suit stick control as well as it did a mouse, its visual flair and intriguing mix of play mechanics still appeal.

But, for now at least, Xbox Live Arcade's heart is in its twin sticks. *Robotron* is the clue, but it's picked up by *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* (400 points; see p90), updated for the hi-def era as a lightshow worthy of bonfire night. Shareware classic *Mutant Storm Reloaded* (800) provides a very satisfactory stopgap until its full sequel is released on Live Arcade. And, if those leave you a little too frazzled, you can always return to the familiar charms of *Crystal Quest* (800), available in both classic and souped-up modes.





The ring of light (above) is unlikely to have a substantial impact on your gaming life, but its counterparts on joypads themselves are something you quickly come to rely on. The console minus its hard drive (left). Around the back (below), Microsoft's now-expected chunky AV connector dwarfs the additional USB port



prototype of a carousel that will allow the charging of multiple pads at once, but its price and release aren't yet confirmed.

The controller issue demonstrates how, despite the headline bargain price of £210, the cost of 360 ownership could rapidly escalate. Economise with the Core pack and you could end up spending another £100 on pads and chargers, plus around £23 for an essential memory unit, or £70 should you regret being without a hard drive. Throw in £15 for a faceplate and £20 for the extremely elegant, fully featured remote (not to mention a Live subscription and a headset) and you could more than double that initial outlay. Microsoft is adamant that this policy increases customer choice, but forcing so many separate purchases won't do its – or the retailers' – profitability any harm.

But if the physical side of the 360 vision – the wireless, customised, always-online dream – is going to take a fair bit of investment to create, the virtual side of it comes as standard. The multimedia connectivity is as easy as promised. Plugging in most MP3 players or cameras gives quick access to music files or photos, and while the interface provides only fairly basic functionality (a rather laborious playlist-creation tool and a slideshow option), it is elegant and easy to navigate. If you want to access files on your PC, it requires a free download of Windows Media Connect (about 6.5Mb) from the Microsoft website. A fairly straightforward connection procedure gives you access to whatever music, movie and image files you want to share between the machines. The same plug'n'play mentality extends to things like USB keyboards, which can be used in place of the 360 console's onscreen text input system.

THE MULTIMEDIA CONNECTIVITY IS AS EASY AS PROMISED, GIVING ACCESS TO MUSIC OR PHOTOS

Music can also be ripped from CDs to the hard drive (as with Xbox), and whatever tunes are accessible from the dashboard can also be used in-game, either from within the game software or – at any time, in any game – by accessing the dashboard overlay via the 360 button. This also allows you to sign in and out of profiles, and game software currently available seems to cope with the dashboard's brief usurpation of their autonomy very solidly, dutifully pausing until you've done what you need to do. It's still a slightly intrusive procedure, however, interrupting the game's visual identity with the rather clinical sign-in blade and – in early test machines at least – sullied by a shuddery slide-in effect. Signing in and out also takes a fair few seconds more than most instant-gratification gamers would like, but

there's no question that there are merits to unifying each player's identity across the whole system. And, of course, 360 owners who are the primary users of the machine can set it to auto sign-in with their profile and never need see the blade if they don't wish to.

That identity can also be expressed – albeit subtly – throughout the system. Images viewed from a connected PC or camera can be set as wallpaper with the press of a button. Each player is also visually represented on the system by a tile, currently chosen from a dismal selection of 12. There's no obvious way to upload your own images (presumably to prevent a rash of bared backsides on Live), but games can install new tiles, and more will be made downloadable. It was initially intended that faceplates could come with software which automatically themed your dashboard around your new-look machine, but this now seems more likely to be made available as a download. It's clear that Microsoft won't allow themes that radically change the look of the dash – its use is too integral to the machine's gaming functions to allow substantial changes – but being able to set something of your own seal on the machine does add to the sense of ownership.

More significantly, it also allows you to set a number of overarching presets which will (in theory) govern the setup of all games played through your profile. General defaults let you set overall game difficulty, character colours (for multiplayer) and controller sensitivity. Action-game settings govern whether or not you prefer to invert, which stick you use for movement and whether you approve of auto-aim and auto-centre. Driving-game defaults set your choice of automatic or manual gears, your preferred control method for acceleration and braking (buttons or triggers) and ideal camera position. Obviously, all of these defaults can be overruled within any particular game's options settings, and it's yet to be seen how universally effective they'll prove, but if it works well it could represent one of the most significant contributions the 360 makes toward smoothing and unifying your gameplay experiences.

WHEN A GAME LETS YOU DOWN, THE 360 IS THERE IN A WAY THAT NO CONSOLE HAS EVER BEEN BEFORE

Completing your 360 identity is the information stored on your Gamer Profile. As well as keeping track of the number of different games played (which will naturally be an uninspiring tally in the short term), your profile also shows your achievements. Each game is given 1,000 Gamerscore points (or Gs) to play with, which can be divided up among whatever in-game achievements the developer sees fit. For some, they may echo your progress through the game: *Kameo*'s early achievements, for instance, simply reward recovering each of the warriors. Other games have a more inventive approach to the tasks required to earn your points, like *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*'s challenge of staying alive for a full minute without firing. It initially seems like an extremely



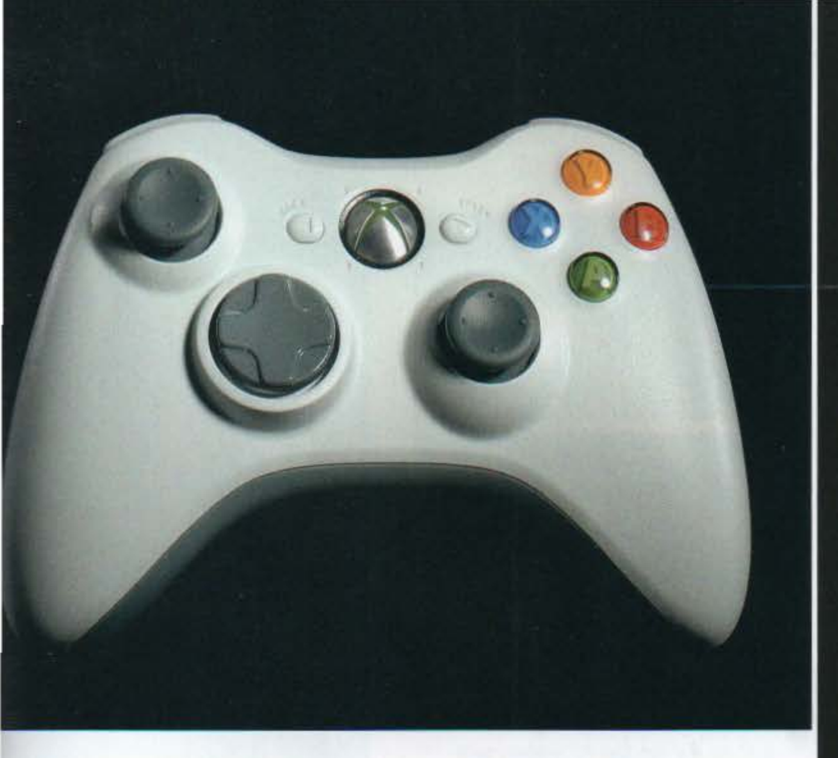






Two comparisons of two different quality gaps. The top two shots show the same screen taken from *PGR3*'s photo mode. The first demonstrates how the screen could look on a standard-resolution TV through an S-Video input; the second shows a direct screendump of the game at full hi-def resolution. The two *Gun* images (above) show another difference: the first is a screendump of the Xbox version, the second of the same scene on 360





WHEN THE HARDWARE, SOFTWARE AND SERVICES COME TOGETHER, THE RESULTS LEAP A GENERATION

shallow approach to enhancing the longevity of games, but its real function is the surprising satisfaction in your total, which quickly sparks quiet rivalries.

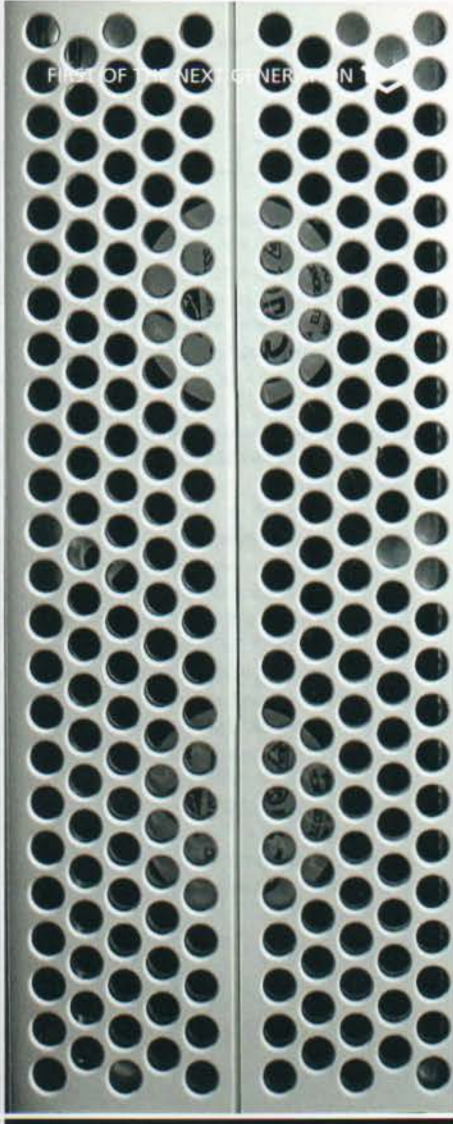
This score is one of the pieces of information that other players will see about you if you use Live. In order to access the free Silver service you'll need a hard drive or a memory card, and this will give you access to the Marketplace, via which you can download demos (the *Kameo* demo, the only one initially available, clocks in at 500Mb), movies and new themes, or buy subscriptions to pay-per-month games. Anything that needs to be paid for uses Microsoft Points, which can be bought through Xbox Live – each point, handily, costs exactly 0.85p and they come in bundles of 500 (£4.25) up to 5,000 (£42.50). Game shops will also sell prepaid cards, which can be redeemed over Live. Playing competitively online requires Gold membership (currently £40 per year or £5 per month).

All this, and you're yet to get to the games. And even before you reach the full retail titles Live Arcade lies in wait, ready to ambush you with emulations of *Smash TV* and updates of shareware heroes like *Mutant Storm*. This is without question one of the most enjoyable facets of 360. Quick and easy to access, it radically increases the range of game styles available on the machine. (For more details on the games available see 'Insert point to play'.) This slick system, the wide range and their low prices (from 400-800 Microsoft Points or £3.40-£7.20) make it instantly clear that the disappointments of the original Live Arcade have served a purpose as a valuable learning curve.

As for the 'real' games, you can read our thoughts on the earliest available titles in Review (p87). They, the old theory goes, are all that matters. It remains true: despite the power that the 360's triple core offers, and despite the clarity its hi-def output brings, the graphical showboating the machine can produce is only an asset when it's in the service of – rather than at the cost of – satisfying, imaginative and sound gameplay. The risk of that not being the case is perhaps as high as it's ever been, but when a game does let you down, the 360 is there in a way that no console has been before, with a safety net of default settings, and a treasure trove of gaming and musical distractions. And when – as Microsoft has always proclaimed – the software, the hardware and the services come together, as they do on p88, the results really do leap a generation. The Xbox was a machine designed around accommodating the preconceptions and assumptions of the established gaming market. The 360 is Microsoft redefining console gaming on its own terms. When Sony and Nintendo return to the hardware fray next year, they're going to find the groundrules have been changed.

NEW FOR OLD

For all the potential that high-definition TV technology has to improve gaming (you can read our guide to the technology on p72, plus notes on our review policy on p87), the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of 360 owners will debut the machine on a standard-definition TV, and often a 4:3 screen at that. What will they see? Put *PGR2* and *PGR3* side by side on standard-definition TVs and the answer is a substantial, but not striking, improvement. Xbox 360 is clearly superior – particularly when you slow down enough to notice the finer details – but the difference is almost like that between, say, early- and late-generation PS2 titles. The flipside of that situation, of course, will be experienced by 360 owners who, initially at least, are likely to be playing upscaled versions of current-generation games on a new machine plugged into a spanking new HDTV. A similar side-by-side comparison, between *Gun* on an Xbox and a standard TV, and *Gun* on 360 on an HDTV, shows a similar performance gap, perhaps more like that between a very early and a late Xbox game. Obviously this will fluctuate much more depending on the amount of work put in by the developer to optimise the 360's potential, but it seems the least you can expect is greater solidity and clarity, even if the results can be a little unforgiving on some details and textures. Examples of how the differences are evident in practice can be seen on the facing page.



UNPOD

Although Microsoft has played heavily on the fact that the 360 can interconnect with other desirable pieces of consumer electronics like Sony's PSP and Apple's iPod, the latter seems likely to cause some serious headaches. No formal cooperation was agreed between Microsoft and Apple to include iPod playback on the machine, so the functionality available is based on Microsoft's own software. The results are that songs purchased through iTunes (and therefore through its digital rights management system) don't show up on 360 at all, and while MP3s will play perfectly, AACs seem to be inaccessible. A further worry is that rumours are gathering weight that Apple, displeased by the fact Microsoft did not choose to enter the 360 into its costly Made For iPod integration programme, may request that the playback function be removed from 360 once it's released. Another possibility is that future iPod firmware could prevent the 360 from accessing any tracks at all. Users of more generic MP3 players, particularly those with simple drag'n'drop interfaces, shouldn't hit any problems, although early tests with a Sony player have proved entirely unsuccessful.



DEVELOPING ON XBOX 360

While for the consumer the most important factors of the 360 are its physical, visible aspects, for the developer what matters are the things that can't be seen. **Roger Perkins**, lead coder on *Project Gotham Racing 3*, talks us through the machine from inside out.

In real terms, how did the multiple-core nature of the 360 CPU affect development?

The multi-core nature of the Xbox 360 didn't affect the whole team. Due to the time constraints we were working under, we made some good decisions early on as to how we would utilise all the processing power we thought we would have. That allowed most of the team to just focus on doing what they do best, while a few programmers could then concentrate on how best to distribute the work across the different cores. We'd used multiple threads on the original Xbox so most of the concepts weren't new. However, the ways the cores interact with each other present other challenges you need to be fully aware of.

How did you handle the transition between the substantial differences from the alpha, beta and final development kits?

The one thing MS did on their previous console, that they did so well again, is to keep the development environment stable across hardware changes. There's always going to be little problems, but if you can take the code you had before and just recompile for the new hardware then it makes our jobs so much easier. The trickier part of the transition for us was dealing with the change in the way the CPUs work, as we switched to the custom processor for the final console.

The first thing you learn is if you come to this console and treat it like the original Xbox you'll probably get worse performance than before. The processor and architecture isn't as forgiving about doing things badly as the old Intel chips were. However, do things the way it likes and the thing springs to life and screams along. The faster that processors become, the more you have to worry about previously mundane things like how long it takes to fetch data from memory to do calculations; how well are you utilising the L1 and L2 caches. This on its own can cause you to have to rethink the way some things are done and to write code to work the way the console likes.

What's it like working with ATI's GPU?

The GPU in the 360 is just so flexible; depending on what you're doing you can shift the available processing power around to focus on particularly expensive shaders, etc. One of the big things that will be opened up by this console is post-processing effects, the 360 finally having the fill-rate the original Xbox so badly lacked. The use of V3 shader technology opens up the possibilities for anything the developers can think of, including parallax mapping. This new flexibility is going to take a while for developers to capitalise on, though, although developers already pushing the top-end PC market, such as Epic, already have a major headstart in this area.

"ONE OF THE BIG THINGS THAT WILL BE OPENED UP BY THIS CONSOLE IS POST-PROCESSING EFFECTS"



The overall polish of *Project Gotham Racing 3* is testimony to how smoothly its production ran, and that in turn is testimony to Microsoft's effectiveness in delivering successive development kits that were sufficiently stable





Unlike some other launch titles, *PGR3* is claimed to make efficient use of all three cores. Which partly explains why it looks so comprehensively beautiful

From a developer's perspective, what's the best thing about the 360 architecture when compared to the original Xbox?

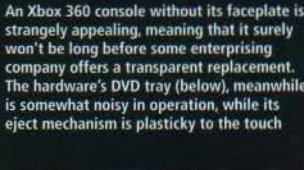
The best things have to include more processing power, flexibility and memory. This allows us to do crazy things we couldn't have hoped for on the original Xbox. If I had to single any one thing out as a negative from a developer's point of view I'd have to say the fact that we can no longer rely on the HDD.

Can you sum up your experience with the hardware to date? And how do you think coding on PS3 will compare?

The one thing MS always does well is provide a great and familiar development environment. This means you don't waste valuable time being confused or having to install Linux just to get basic tools up and running. Despite aggressive development hardware delivery dates we didn't need to resort to cutting corners to write *PGR3*'s technology.

I'd say that it doesn't look like Sony will change its development 'pattern' as we have seen from PS1 onwards, and this will still make it a tough and challenging proposition for us developers, although their new partnerships and acquisitions could help to make the ride smoother this time around. Call me biased, but because of the great working environment and tools already on the 360, I think we'll see more games that make better use of the hardware – at least a lot earlier in the console's lifecycle – from many more developers on 360 than you will on the PS3.





An Xbox 360 console without its faceplate is strangely appealing, meaning that it surely won't be long before some enterprising company offers a transparent replacement. The hardware's DVD tray (below), meanwhile, is somewhat noisy in operation, while its eject mechanism is plasticky to the touch



This is the power supply for test 360 units. Microsoft promises that the power supply boxed with full retail versions will be 'slightly' smaller. At nearly ten inches in length, any reduction in size at all will be welcome

WAITING FOR ZERO HOUR

Perfect Dark Zero was supposed to arrive for review this month (hence its mention on this issue's packaging) but was pulled at the last minute because, as we go to press, Rare is still working on its ambitious FPS. In the absence of final code we've been investing extended play time in preview levels. And it's clear that there's greatness ticking away beneath a tone that wavers between enjoyably excessive action and some wincingly cheesy moments. In some respects that's the fault of the game's music, as it wavers between being likeably and suitably overblown, and just being invasively overpowering.

Otherwise, *PDZ*'s audio appears to be suitably lavish, especially in the barks and snaps of its superlative guns, from the bone-cracking sniper rifle to the bullet-puking RCP 90. Weapon feedback is striking in terms of feel, but also in a visual manner, in the sprays of blood from headshots and the subsequent ragdoll show as bodies loll awkwardly against railings or skid floppily down a staircase. There's great joy to be had from the weapon set, but there's more to it than simply enabling punchy gunfights. Secondary weapon functions likely won't be fully exploited during the first playthrough – where point'n'spray shootouts will likely be king – but blossom instead when the player returns and starts experimenting. Enemy placement seems perfunctory that first time through, but becomes a source of evermore satisfying stealth and gun battles on subsequent plays, and on higher difficulties.



Enemy armour shatters under gunfire, which is a neat detail. An equally impressive lack of detail sees the ammo grouped by class rather than weapon, meaning you're not tied to using only the guns carried by a level's enemies

IT'S CLEAR THERE'S GREATNESS BENEATH A TONE THAT WAVERS FROM EXCESSIVE TO CHEESY

Dark, despite her youth, looks oddly aged in certain cutscenes. Her face, like those of her enemies, is set with shadowy, waxen detail which looks attractive in some lights and craggy and wizened in others. The moments when she goes thirdperson – climbing, taking cover or riding a zipline – are plentiful, which may sound obtrusive, but they do seem a tidier alternative to maintaining a firstperson perspective in such situations. Indeed, the cover manoeuvre, allowing Dark to hide while still being able to spy over or around her hiding place, feels more and more worthwhile the longer the game is played. At first it gives the simple, gleeful pleasure of an ambush, before becoming essential for tackling groups of enemies before they can become problematic.

There's some excellent scale to these early levels, and a strong curiosity to see what's next, considering how little of the game has been shown. High-res textures have become a kind of next-gen cliché, a carrot to distract from questions of gameplay, but it's hard not to be preoccupied by the quality of those in *PDZ*, which lean toward a pristine, damply glossy detail in their up-close clarity.

Plenty of FPSes are accomplished, but few manage to offer a challenge curve that spreads as smoothly across the difficulty settings as it does across the game itself. And that could very well be where the heart of *PDZ*'s action is at, if its level design can match the rewards of its arsenal.



There's a scarcity of checkpoints in the second and third stages – a step away from quicksaving that may become the basis for an addictive challenge







The Hong Kong stage takes in a car park, a street scene, a warehouse and a subway. The emphasis is on variety – and on surfaces so slick they look slippery

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Rollercoaster Tycoon 3



The age-old battle between tycoon games and actual work continues, the **Edge** funland growing from Disneyland to Disneyverse, paved with puddles of vomit and tears.
PC, ATARI

Quake 4



Getting the railgun reticle over a moving target is one thing; doing so in the two seconds before your own head comes off is another. As they say, practice makes average...
PC, ACTIVISION

Riviera: The Promised Land



What happens when you strip shops, EXP and random battles out of an RPG? You get a seductively bitty adventure that's a little stronger on charm than tactics.
GBA, ATLUS

Seeing is desiring
When good old technology won't lay down and die



Games like *Condemned* are entirely geared around maximising the impact of the 360's visual power: it wouldn't be possible to properly judge it by viewing it on a standard-definition TV

Say what you like about the advantages of CRT TV screens – black blacks, crisp pictures, clean colours – for gamers they do have one serious disadvantage: they don't half last.

The arrival of the 360 means that, at a stroke, your old telly isn't good enough. Even if it's top-of-the-range standard definition, you'll be missing out. And there's a fair chance it isn't top of the range: maybe it's a bit on the small side, maybe the screen's not as flat as you'd like. Maybe it's not widescreen. Which would be bearable if it was at least showing some signs of conking out. But chances are it isn't.

And that means you're unlikely to be provided with a convenient (and potentially spouse-soothing) rationale for upgrading. Buying hi-def is a substantial and undisguisable investment in gaming. And is it worth it? In a word, yes. Your eyes will like the change. Going from the grubby smear of the bedroom telly to a shining slot of 16:9 solidity is a difference you can actually feel, as your brain and eyes relax from the gentle but steady strain of reconciling a square of staticky fizz to a world you can believably inhabit. It isn't the future any more. It's the now.

So what if you don't? Are you missing out badly? In a word, no. Your good old telly is still a good old telly. 360 games will still look better. All the other benefits, of Live Arcade and wireless pads and faster processors, will still apply. And in a few years' time, when that CRT does pack it in, you'll have a month of guaranteed delight, rediscovering old games in their full glory.

Which leaves us with the dilemma of how we review these games. On a widescreen, hi-def, Dolby 7.1 setup, as they were designed? Or on a decent current telly, as they're likely to be played? The gulf between theory and practice has never been so big.

In the end, of course, it's not much of a dilemma. All the 360 games in this issue (and in future) will be reviewed as they were designed to be played, in hi-def, surround-sound glory. And, for a similar reason, they'll be reviewed from a 360 with a hard drive.

In the meantime, of course, we've got a couple of very decent old SD CRTs up for sale. Only half-a-dozen not-so-careful owners. Offers to the usual address...



88 **Project Gotham Racing 3** 360

92 **Kameo: Elements Of Power** 360

94 **Condemned: Criminal Origins** 360

96 **Call Of Duty 2** 360, PC

98 **Shadow Of The Colossus** PS2



100 **Prince Of Persia: The Two Thrones** GC, PC, PS2, XBOX

101 **Peter Jackson's King Kong** GC, PC, PS2, XBOX

102 **Stubbs The Zombie** MAC, PC, XBOX

103 **Soul Calibur 3** PS2

104 **Guitar Hero** PS2

105 **Gun** 360, GC, PC, PS2, XBOX

106 **Mario Kart DS** DS



107 **GTA: Liberty City Stories** PSP

109 **Ratchet: Gladiator** PS2

109 **The Warriors** PS2, XBOX

110 **The Matrix: Path Of Neo** PC, PS2, XBOX

110 **Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney** GBA

111 **Sonic Rush** DS

111 **Gunstar Super Heroes** GBA

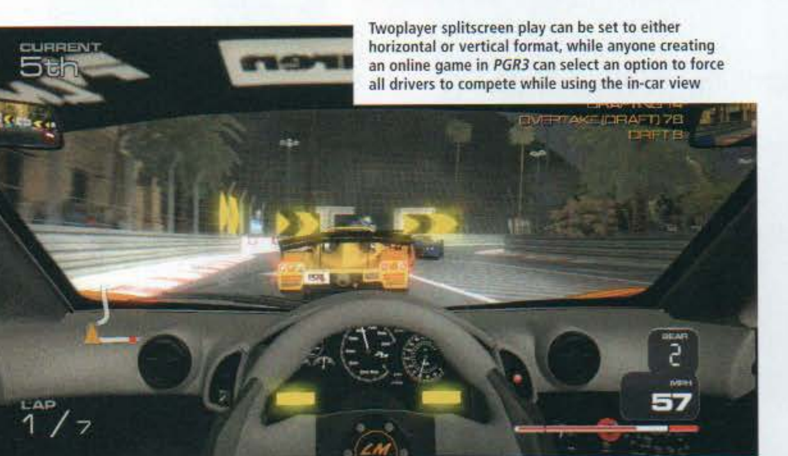
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: DECEMBER 2
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS DEVELOPER: BIZARRE CREATIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E153

Twoplayer splitscreen play can be set to either horizontal or vertical format, while anyone creating an online game in *PGR3* can select an option to force all drivers to compete while using the in-car view









Crowds line the streets of every city, virtual fans of *Gotham*'s sport tucked away behind barriers and fences. While they're effective at adding some atmosphere and ceremony to the events, they do have a habit of flashing cameras and sounding klaxons as the player zips by, although it's not offensive enough to be an irritation





The in-car view from open-top vehicles like the Ariel Atom and Elfin MS8 feels brilliantly naked, offering extensive views of track while retaining a dizzying impression of speed. A further variation on conventional driving setups is available in the McLaren F1 RM, whose driving position is set in the centre of its cockpit

Sleek, powerful examples of superior engineering, capable of immense speeds and rendered in a seductive form, offering an exhilarating experience that symbolises passion, attention to detail and, of course, the chance to just plain show off. Words used to describe the supercars that appear in *Project Gotham Racing 3* can be just as apt to describe the *PGR* games themselves (not forgetting *Metropolis Street Racer*, of course). At its optimum fidelity (see this month's Review intro on p87), however, *PGR3* is a revelation. This is Microsoft's hi-def mantra in full flow, of heightened states of sensation brought on by a technical touch that exceeds mere texture updates. The impression of speed and detail – and the effect they exert on one another – is tremendous but best enjoyed via *PGR3*'s most considerable new offering, an in-car view. The game can still be played via bumper and chase cams, but the experience on offer there is best suited to those heavy-handed handbrake whores who like to vandalise the racing line. For those who wish to take the risk/reward ratio even further, the in-car viewpoint brings a whole new level of discipline into play. And it's still one that can be savoured without the need for any delicate skill, but offers incredible satisfaction to those who master it.



> This is Microsoft's hi-def mantra in full flow, heightened states of sensation brought on by a technical touch that exceeds mere textures

The level of feedback available in-car is phenomenal, from the lurch of the driver as brakes are slammed on or the vehicle surges into a higher gear, to the slight shuddering of the interior under heavy acceleration. Ditto the craftsmanship: glinting dashboard furniture, rattling bonnets and windscreens that swim with the reflections of passing structures and lights, and sometimes the slight dusty smear of dirt kicked up by an



The Nurburgring isn't the jazziest of environments, as many racing games have proven before. But it remains treacherous and unique among the game's courses, a high-speed and hugely long track with very few barriers







PGR3 offers numerous badges as rewards for meeting certain criteria. They range from the trivial (3x kudos combo) to the difficult (perform every kudos manoeuvre in one race). The obligatory gamer profile achievements on the 360 dash are slightly more interesting than the norm, given to players who collect all of the game's Ferraris, for example, or take a photo in every city





It's almost cruel that some of *PGR3*'s most breathtaking sights are to be had while glancing to the side when travelling at top speed in the middle of a busy race. The blur from the player's head movement (turned with the right stick) is just as convincing as the environment spooling past



Forza's antidotes to the frustration of pack racing aren't here – none of its vehicles' impeccable manners, no chance of starting out in anything bar last place – but they aren't really missed. The jostle of the pack feels like an integral part of *PGR3*, and nothing offensive undertaking can't solve

off-track error on the Nurburgring, all realised with an eye for effective, convincing flourish. And, of course, the audio design – the machine-gun throb of a wheel straying on to a kerb, the bassy whoosh of a Las Vegas overhang, the rocket-fuelled whine of a super-tuned vehicle reaching its stride. And it's all conveyed via some substantial contact between vehicle and road, with every dimple, crest and bump being felt by the player's vehicle, if not their pad. It's this overwhelming attention to bodywork and its interaction with the environment that turns *PGR3* into something sensational; race replays become pornography, and the mid-race photo mode option becomes a hobby rather than a gimmick. The multiple garages, dazzling distractions more than anything else, exist to show off its cars in some truly flattering light. As per *PGR2*'s showroom, they can be explored in firstperson for the sake of ogling your collection from all angles, and maybe find an arcade machine or two. And for all this vibrant recreation of reality, *PGR3* manages to offer a handling model that's straightforward and ballsy but open to the application of skill, and not at the cost of denying each car its own personality.

There's a shift in attitude as well as perspective, and one that's just as welcome: *PGR3*'s manifesto of accessibility. Aside from the main career mode is Playtime, an option where every track and the majority of vehicles – including the most powerful performance cars in the game – are available from the off. Racing the F50GT through New York's White Street Bends route at night via in-car mode is spectacular, and available out of the box. It's an approach that doesn't kill off the desire to succeed by giving you access to some of the game's greatest moments from the very start. Quite the opposite, as it serves as strong encouragement for getting better at the game, instead of simply getting better at going through it.

While competition is emphasised continually in the career mode – badges, achievements and multi-tiered medals are to be earned – the player still has plenty of flexibility, as any car, even the player's first, can be used to tackle every singe career



During any race, the pause menu offers Photo mode, a diversion that can result in a quick snap becoming half an hour of painstaking tweaking, zooming and fiddling with effects. Photo mode is also available while in the garages

mode challenge, whose goals are adjusted accordingly. However, the mooted cooperative mode, whereby two players could team up over Live or in splitscreen in order to tackle the goals of the career mode in a mutual manner, has been scrapped. A handful of new career mode goals have been added to the traditional fare of street races, cone challenges and hot laps – Time Vs Kudos (the clock stops counting down while style points are being earned), Breakthrough (checkpoint-fuelled time trial) and Drift Challenge (earn a preset amount of kudos in a very short interval). Incidentally, splitscreen

CONTINUED >

Geometry soars



It's hard not to give a warm welcome to the return of *PGR2*'s distractingly beautiful twin-stick shooter *Geometry Wars*, but that warmth won't be reciprocated by *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*. Instead, it *burns*, scalding the player's eyes with some unbelievably handsome and intense explosions, set on a fine blue-grid backdrop that warps and ripples in a hypnotic manner once the action hits its very own equivalent of 170mph. A shotgun blast of vibrant colour and relentlessly simple twitch play, it's as perfect a demonstration of 360's HDTV output as any full-price software.

Incidentally, *Retro Evolved* as it appears in *PGR3* is just a four-minute demo, but no less compulsive for it. The full version of the game can be purchased from Live's Marketplace for 400 points (£3.40).



New kinds of kudos (points awarded for vehicle manoeuvres) include brake slide, feint drift, braking drift, power over, braking feint, braking power over and top speed. This wide variety of skid manoeuvres helps make up for the fact that kudos-rich cone challenges have cone gates that can sometimes be difficult to see



play doesn't allow in-car view, although that's an understandable limitation considering that the field of view would be so cramped as to be undrivable.

After being spoiled by the wide range of locations available in *PGR2*, *PGR3*'s selection of five environments may seem slim, but each has enough local flavour – tarted up like never before – to compensate in both appearance and topography. The scattering of monuments-as-hazards across London, the slender liabilities that are Tokyo's roads, the plump, sweeping bends of Vegas and, of course, the bridges of New York – bridges that form exhilarating drag strips and link the canyon walls of neon that make up the city itself at night. The Nurburgring remains a terrifyingly risky event, but it's visually the weakest thanks to *PGR3*'s one hobble, the trees that look weak and tattered next to the gleaming, sculpted precision of everything else. Rain is also absent from the game's weather system, whose range is limited to 'overcast', a suitably moody and sour alternative to the glare of any daytime track. The lack of a downpour is more of a shame than a simple omission, if only to see it implemented in a manner as striking as the rest of the game's effects. Night races do offer a slight advantage to in-car drivers, making best use of the vehicle's headlights, but the luminosity of *PGR3*'s cities after sundown – lots of dusky yellows and the glare of urban pollution from umpteen glowing billboards and lit storefronts – means the night races just feel more like a different kind of pretty, as opposed to a new experience.

> PGR3 hasn't moved from its niche, not at all – at its core, it's still a savvy mixture of real form and hyper-real function

Xbox Live options are broad, and potentially terrific if the online service proves to be robust. Gotham TV is the game's dedicated channel for watching community-wide highlights, each of which is open to 30,000 viewers at a time. Red Vs Blue team races and Capture The Track modes for two to eight players feature, along with a *Forza*-like online career

PGR3 hasn't moved from its niche, not at all – at its core, it's still pure *PGR*, a savvy and standalone mixture of real form and hyper-real function – but it's been transformed into a wondrous and rewarding beauty spot. It's no contender for the thrones occupied by *OutRun 2*, *Gran Turismo* or *Ridge Racer*, just the true heir to its own. It further closes the gaps between player, pad, console and TV by offering something so luxuriously pliant and gratifying for all standards of player, and sits comfortably among the advantages of high-definition gaming, as was likely to be expected from such a series. But that's not to rob Bizarre Creations of its entitlement to this achievement, in producing one of the most accessibly intense and outstanding racing experiences ever to be had, and felt. **[9]**



If there's an issue with the in-car view, it's that the steering speed reflects the player's twitches of the stick, resulting in hyperactive movements. In a replay of a multiplayer session it will likely seem that the racers are nervous caffeine addicts







KAMEO

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: DECEMBER 2
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: RARE PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E151, E155





The game's spectacular day/night cycle penetrates everywhere, even into dungeon interiors and boss battles. While the contrast is dramatic, playing at night can be frustratingly gloomy, although that only serves to make the first peachy glow of dawn all the more welcome



"We goosed it, we tweaked it, we spun it and we fabricated it." It's almost impossible to play *Kameo* without hearing **J Allard**'s words from the MTV unveiling of 360 echoing around the back of your head. This is a game that's been upgraded from GameCube to Xbox, and then from Xbox to 360 and, looking at it, you get the feeling you could peel away layers of detail from the screen like layers of old wallpaper, back to the original flat textures and plain lighting.

It may seem a little shallow to start with *Kameo*'s looks, but it's a game that gives you no choice. From the moment you arrive in the Enchanted Kingdom, every single square millimetre of the screen clamours for your attention. Every aspect of every thing's appearance literally dazzles. The colours are brighter and denser than you're used to, each blade of grass sways in the wind, the air is thick with dandelion wisps: even the dust shimmers. Everywhere you look, perfectly fluffed creatures are scurrying to and fro, and as day turns to night every surface reflects the sheen of flickering torches and every NPC is lit by the glow of your dragon's fiery breath. Alone of all the early 360 games, it almost becomes tiring to watch, your eye roaming constantly across the screen, attracted by detail after detail. Everything that could be done to wow you with the new console's power has been done.

Once you begin to adjust to the grandeur of the setting, you start to take note of the fact that this isn't quite the game you might have expected it to be. Despite the hokey plot (kingdom in peril, family kidnapped, kill Trolls for victory) and roster of ten warriors with upgradeable powers, this isn't an RPG. Nor, despite some spots of ledge-hanging and crevasse-hopping, is it a platformer. It has dungeons, but progressing through them takes little more than muscle and not much in the way of puzzle-solving. The last thing the world needs is more hybrid genres, but the closest label you can stick to *Kameo* is that of a combat-adventure.



From the moment you arrive, every millimetre of the screen clamours for your attention. Every aspect of every thing's appearance dazzles

In order to rescue her family and banish the Trolls, Kameo – who's armed only with a pair of gossamer wings and a very ladylike cartwheel kick – must rescue the spirits of great elemental warriors. These she can then absorb and call on their substantial powers at will. Taken individually, they are each characters who wouldn't quite be charismatic or enjoyable enough to carry a game on their own. Chilla is an armoured yeti, able to impale enemies on his spiky back and rain shards of ice on his assailants. Major Ruin's ball form can boost him over gaps and into pipes. Become the dragon, Ash, and his breath is as useful for lighting torches as it is inflaming Plant Trolls. But what *Kameo* does is give you free access to all these characters all the time (after each is rescued, of course). Three can be set to the face buttons, but all are instantly selectable from the wheel which pops up if you hold down one of those buttons. Swapping between them is quick, so that rather than having ten characters, Kameo becomes the chameleon her name always hinted at: a single character with many dozens of attacks, never in the same form for more than a minute.

What you hope is that this complexity will allow the game to put sophisticated and flexible challenges before you – whether traditional puzzles or tricky combat scenarios – and let you find your own solutions to them. But, despite a few fights with enemies who need to be stunned, or whose shields need to be destroyed, in many situations brute force will see you through. Similarly, the hope that the interaction between the characters – dousing enemies with Deep



Kameo and her family are by far the least appealing of the game's characters, bearing the hallmarks of repeated redesigns. She's by no means an 11th wheel, however, hovering tirelessly out of trouble







The game's longevity is ensured with a score attack mode, as well as the possibility of replaying each dungeon cooperatively. Twoplayer offers perhaps a better way than the main game of exploring the way different warriors' abilities can interact in combat



Although beautiful, *Kameo's* extremely diverse environments never quite gel into entirely believably, inhabited locations





The 360's power has allowed Rare to massively expand the kind of attacks the warriors can perform. Chilla can wander all over with a couple of fully animated trolls spiked on his back, ready to wriggle free and restart the fight when they get the chance. It's a technical achievement, but just as appreciable as a bit of slapstick and an inventive piece of game design

Blue's oil before torching them with Ash's fire breath, for example – would further deepen the possibilities for creative carnage is short-lived. The warriors' abilities tend to function either as basic lock-and-key puzzles and in combat it quickly becomes apparent that a couple of the characters can handle nearly anything the game throws at them.

But if *Kameo* is successful as an inventive brawler, other frustrations serve as an early warning for just how high a standard next-generation gaming sets itself. When so much work has gone into the game's visuals and so much effort has been poured into the most insignificant cosmetic flourish, you find your patience for the hiccups that still plague many games is reduced to almost zero. When the camera glitches, as it does very occasionally, or when a boss intro cinematic can't be skipped after you've died and tried again, or when bad prompting from the game's narrator sends you on half an hour's wild goose chase, all you can think is 'All this, but they can't fix that?' Games are going to have to be exceptional in every element of their design, implementation and presentation to live up to the potential afforded by such capable new technology.

And that concern rather eclipses the discovery that Rare has made a good adventure game, which was looking like becoming something of a lost art. It may be a little hollow at heart, and occasionally frustrating, but if this is the 360's first adventuring benchmark, the games that follow have their work cut out for them. **[7]**



Although much of the detail on the characters is spectacular, the game's original age shows in some of its plainer textures, with walls and grasslands often looking blocky and repetitive. Water, too, is oddly disappointing

Those modern things

It's not just *Kameo's* visuals that are next-generation – some of its simpler design ideas are also unusually forward thinking. The game's help system isn't especially sophisticated, but it does ensure it should be impossible for your progress to ever hit a brick wall. And although the structure – find new area, find dungeon, find boss – will be familiar, the game does you the courtesy of giving you a new warrior early on in each new location, rather than meanly rationing out your toys. Its frequent and unobtrusive saves also act as a case study in how to keep a game flowing – except in a couple of infuriating examples where checkpoints are badly placed.



CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: DECEMBER 2
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151





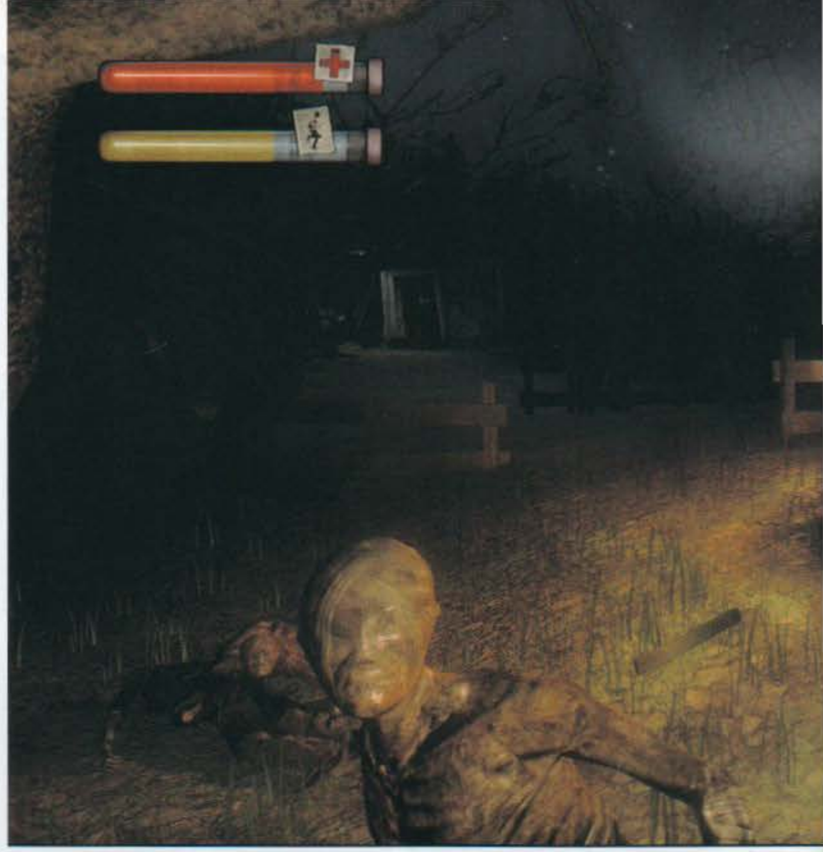
Condemned's hero and heroine, Agent Thomas and his lab contact Rosa, are unglamourised as game characters go. With wrinkles, spectacles, stout shoes and shapeless clothes, these are unusually credible officers of the law

It's common, indeed sensible, for those working on new-generation launch games to develop tunnel vision, fixating on one capability of the new hardware, inching the art of games forward. Even so, *Condemned* is unusually, almost myopically obsessive. This firstperson forensic-horror title's sole concerns are texture and shadows. The decaying urban locations its title puns upon are absolutely ingrained with filth, slick with moisture and saturated with darkness. Their state of ruin is documented fastidiously in photorealistic detail, and then broken into shifting fragments by stammering striplights and a probing torch.

It's a confined and unvarying look – *Half-Life 2*'s dankest corners on some hellish loop – but it's powerfully unsettling all the same. Dismissing Monolith's efforts as merely cosmetic would be unfair, because *Condemned* is horror, where atmosphere is everything, and as a test case for what new hardware and hi-def displays can bring to the genre it's electrifyingly persuasive. It would also be unfair to suggest that this is the only area in which *Condemned* displays any creative ambition, but its other peculiarities don't hit with half the impact, and are starkly minimal in conception.

The game is dressed up as a detective thriller, and begins that way in earnest, with FBI agent and serial-killer expert Ethan Thomas' arrival at the latest crime scene to be ghoulishly staged by his current prey, the Match Maker. This immediately introduces his tools, divided into detection (laser, UV light and gas spectrometer) for finding clues, and collection (chemical sampler, 3D scanner and digital camera) for sending them back to lab contact Rosa for analysis.

Crime-scene analysis is *Condemned*'s most intriguing proposition and, sadly, its least fulfilling. The equipment is beautifully modelled, pleasant to use and employs a range of subtly impressive visual effects, but it's entirely contextual: a single button press is prompted whenever Thomas nears evidence, and the appropriate tool selected automatically. It's pleasurable in a methodical way, but utterly mindless, a vaguely interactive form of plot exposition that only feels like it truly involves the player when the UV light is used to follow evidence trails (as in the game's singular, basic riddle near its end). With some skilfully designed scenarios and more player freedom, the forensic tools could have punctuated *Condemned*'s action with disturbing and absorbing brainteasers, and the game could have achieved a union of adventure and action. But Monolith plainly didn't want to risk any interruptions to the metronomic shocks and sculpted waves of tension built into its rigidly scripted ride.



Slow movement is key to building tension, and few game characters have such a ponderous, cautious stride as Ethan Thomas. Infuriating at times, but the harsh limit on sprinting is part of what makes *Condemned* so physically persuasive



> Condemned is horror, where atmosphere is all, and as a test for what new hardware and hi-def displays can bring to the genre, it's persuasive

Back to that ride, then, and its first lurch. Thomas' investigation is disturbed, he gets split from his fellow officers, and is assaulted by the unnaturally violent underclass of vagrants and junkies that is plaguing the city – a phenomenon weakly tied into the game's plot to populate its lonely hunt with a stream of videogame violence fodder. Another more cogent man, possibly the killer, steals his weapon and uses it to kill two police, setting up Thomas' hackneyed, implausible exile from the bureau and quest to clear his name. But this act also peels back *Condemned*'s cinematic skein and its genre-gaming cues, revealing its heart: a firstperson melee combat system, and a profoundly simple but remarkably satisfying one.

Guns do crop up, but ammunition is limited to a few rounds and will never get you far. They're too distant and clinical a way of killing for *Condemned*'s sordid world, anyway – this game is about the survival instinct, the wild pendulum swing from flight







Human characters fall noticeably short of the graphical standards of the locations, or even their peers in the best PC games. Animation and flaccid physics might be the hardest visual credibility gap to bridge







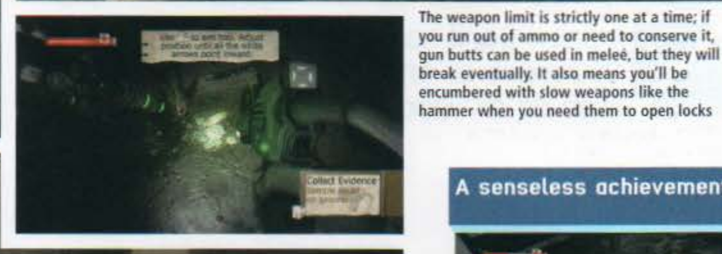
The creepiest parts of the game come early on, especially the Match Maker's shop-dummy tableaux; later, the theme is more paranormal body-horror than twisted psychology, but it still lands powerful blows





Subdued enemies can be finished off with grisly fatal blows, selected on the D-pad. They're an eyeful – the headbutt especially – but pointless, as one regular hit will do the trick





The weapon limit is strictly one at a time; if you run out of ammo or need to conserve it, gun butts can be used in meleé, but they will break eventually. It also means you'll be encumbered with slow weapons like the hammer when you need them to open locks

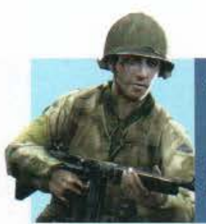
Like *King Kong*, *Condemned* is not a shooter, and opts for a firstperson view solely as a dramatic device. It's fascinating that designers looking to emulate cinema's narrative power are increasingly turning to a perspective with no camera

to fight, vulnerability to animal savagery. Thomas can't use his fists, but he can kick enemies to unbalance them, or daze them with his slow-recharging stun gun; the hard work is done with whatever he can find to use as a cudgel – a length of pipe, a piece of two-by-four impaled with rusty nails, a shovel, a crowbar. Each has different properties, and some also act as keys (crowbars for gates, fire axes for wooden doors), but they broadly fall into two camps: slow, high-damage weapons which block poorly, and the reverse. Each significantly changes the hypnotic, brutal rhythm of the combat: block and beat, block and beat, sidestep, kick, beat, beat, beat. Repeat till meat is tender. But it's that variety that keeps *Condemned*'s endlessly repeating action as barbarically engrossing as it is.

And that is about all there is to it. Simple, one-way mazes decorated with breathtakingly realistic detritus; some scurrying to and fro to find entry tools, some soothing, meaningless detective work; shocks and starts, peripheral-vision flickers, surround-sound misdirection; fight after mesmerising fight with marginally convincing halfwit enemies who are still smart enough to outflank, and to flee when at a disadvantage. It's a testament to Monolith's skill with pacing and sound theatrical instincts (especially in Thomas' startling, grainy hallucinations) that this reductive formula seldom gets old for its brief, six- or seven-hour duration. In fact, had the impeccable direction and set decoration been backed up by a storyline worthy of its filmic inspirations – rather than the nonsensical string of obvious mysteries, faulty motivations, creaky dialogue and thematic copouts it has been saddled with – *Condemned* might just have added up to considerably more than the sum of its parts. It doesn't, but those parts still add up to a scary, vicious, visually progressive if rather hollow next-gen showcase that doesn't outstay its welcome. If you want to spend a night or two in the company of the future of horror videogaming, you could do a lot worse. **[6]**

A senseless achievement

The laziest aspect of the game's design are the achievements that will register on your profile and add to your gamer score. Along with a few more meaningful targets (completing levels using only meleé weapons, for example), there is a uniquely cheerless treasure hunt for the bird carcasses, metal pieces and 360s that are strewn around levels. The only replay value these grim collectables offer is a dogged, exhaustive sort of completism. It's already clear that the score isn't designed to enhance the lifespan of a game, more to make sure your time on 360 adds up to something tangible, but *Condemned*'s uninspired goals demonstrate just how much time you might have to spend on gaming make-work to maximise your score.



CALL OF DUTY 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC PRICE: £50 (360), £35 (PC)
RELEASE: TBC (360), OUT NOW (PC) PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: INFINITY WARD



A good job has been done of simulating the chaos of war, but we expect that 360 can and will do better. Rain should pound and saturate the environment, for example, in more convincing ways than it does here. Improved physics during wild gun battles would also help the cause

The great cycle of technological milestones and accompanying WWII games is like a suppressed memory returning slowly to the surface. Persistent flashbacks of the same Czech hedgehogs, blasted foxholes and high flying plumes of smoke and soil repeat in ever-increasing detail: dreams for some, an ongoing nightmare for others. *Call Of Duty 2* is the latest – as deep in its exploration of the war as a primary school pamphlet and precisely one step beyond its forebears in terms of execution. Sensory execution, that is. The game is a bombardment not only of the eyes

> Infinity Ward has seen the coming of the 360 more as an excuse for amplification than as an opportunity for innovation

and ears, but also of the mind: Infinity Ward has seen the coming of the 360 (alongside the latest generation of PCs) more as an excuse for amplification than as an opportunity for innovation. Progress has been made, for sure, but not to a degree that's going to shake the Earth for those expecting greatness.

Duty's big change has been to join the swelling ranks of games in which health replenishes automatically given a certain period of rest. It's removed any mention of it from its HUD and indicates danger via a mere pulse of red in your peripheral vision. One less foreground graphic equals one less obstruction between you and the action – that much is obvious. But is such a system really the ideal when Krauts (by far the game's favourite word) rather than Covenant are the opposing side? The problem is that when you remove the threat of lasting injury from a game, the player recalibrates their strategy to encompass their effective invulnerability. So when a pointblank brush with five opposing troops leaves you only within an *inch* of death, it qualifies under such a system as tactically sound. But it's not a believable tactic, or a rewarding one.

Elsewhere, *Duty* fights for next-generation territory with an ageing concept of war. It remains troubled by a familiar hypocrisy: the suggestion of realism in a game tethered by the desire for mass appeal. Fair enough, we can't know for sure if that's its real motivation, but feel free to insert your own theory as to why its battles depict shock, gumption and noise, but never pain. Those who fall do so either in silence or with an efficient scream, their dying outstretched hands sooner emptying a pistol at the enemy than begging for divine mercy. This is a pre-watershed war where troops flinch as bullets go in, bounce neatly up and down (but also intact) atop grenade explosions and ping their helmets quirkily into the air when you shoot them in the forehead.

Not that there isn't still a thrill ride to be taken here, but all the associated imagery of fixed rails and rigid scenery applies. As evocative as the blown-out husks of evacuated homes and facilities are, they're also mere dolls' houses where defensive points, furniture and masonry feel borne of a single mould. The exploration of flanking paths and the pursuit of surprise opportunities is predetermined, and therefore false, just as any true sense of modernity is absent from the game in general. Ghosted placeholders for explosive charges dictate where the real thing must go, AI heavy artillery operators are shot and promptly replaced by others, and shortly thereafter comes the inevitable role reversal



In a game that isn't a hundred miles from its predecessor, smoke proves to be one key differentiator. The atmosphere generated as troops charge from the settling clouds is excellent, and backed up by its genuine effect on AI behaviour







Adventure is possible in almost all of *Duty's* standard levels, and a gutsy dash through smoke into your opponents' midst is a reliable way of stealing strategic advantage from them. It is irksome, however, when you exploit what looks like an alternate path or secret passageway only to be led back to it by the game's script minutes later







Grenades are fundamental to the game's design, your own stock replenishing regularly while one after another is thrown at your feet. A vital direction indicator makes you aware of their arrival





Having introduced its stunningly explosive attitude with its Russian campaign, *Duty* falls into a more obvious and less inventive stride, throwing up tiresome vehicle levels (some on rails, others not) to invigorate its relentless action routine

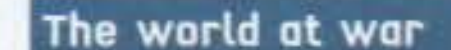
where you're granted another fixed gun emplacement of your own. A baffling lack of physics builds the sense of antiquity, and having to wait for the game's script to open a door for you is, to say the least, weird.

Just like the integral feeling that you're forever being led by the nose. If there isn't a nearby star on the map, there's a migrating flock of allied troops or a single commander yelling directions amid the clamour. This linearity is an entrenched staple of the genre that arguably has its place, but can also be a rod for the back of a game as relentless and repetitive as this one. *Call Of Duty 2* starts loud and stays loud, with character voices defaulting at approximately 85 decibels from the off. One set-piece feeds into another and so on until a given mission ends, and that's usually after one or two set-pieces too many. An iota of intermittent quiet and contrast would have made a world of difference.

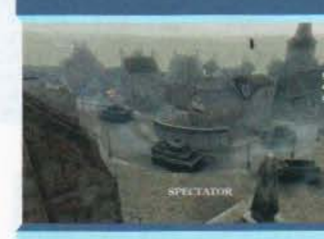
But even if it isn't the most convincing ambassador of its oversubscribed genre, this is still a great advert for its host. Indeed, 360 is arguably the better of the game's two platforms, effortlessly handling PC-calibre graphics on a console with barely a tremor in framerate (except, curiously, on its title screen). The benefits of having both shoulder buttons and dual triggers at your disposal are immediate, grenade tosses proving instinctive while gunplay and associated zooms retain an analogue tactility. In fact, the graceful sweeps as you glance about and the sight of frantic silhouettes charging from feathered smoke (this season's overbright, it seems) *is* a marked step forward in this realm, even if it's just another inexorable hop for PCs.

Thanks to the crisp allure of HD and the innate joys of new hardware, *Call Of Duty*'s time is now, if ever. Its strengths are derived largely from its technology, fresh as it feels on Microsoft's own, though the intensity of the experience, the quality of its 5.1 sound and its context-sensitive squad chatter deserves not to be understated.

For those who can tolerate having their brain beaten numb by it, the game entails often enthralling, occasionally even awe-inspiring sights and sounds. But little is there that's new compared to much that needs renewal. **[7]**



The world at war



Pretty smooth and pretty basic, the various multiplayer options available to *Duty* are logical extensions of the singleplayer campaign and, with little having changed since, not nearly as absorbing as they were when the first game graced PC. The Kill Cam remains great, treating dead players to a replay of their last moments courtesy of the assassin's eyes. But beyond the undeniably slick (even with the screen shared between four players) framerate, the familiar modes make little effort. The lack of distinction between different weapons is a niggle in singleplayer but a major issue here, leaving little hope of strategic depth or variety. The maps may be plentiful and visually sharp, but it takes an army of players to give them life.



Vaulting – something of a recent fad in action games – is implemented better here than in most other cases. Many obstructions are small enough to hop over, and the game is shrewd in letting you do so the moment you reach them rather than insisting you adopt a certain position or face a certain direction. They also provide crucial split-second cover when a brave charge meets heavy opposition



It's these shattered skylines that give the opening campaign immediate impact, filling with troops trying to overwhelm you with strength of numbers. Similar scenes occur later, but never with the same effect



SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $40 (£23)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), Q1 2006 (UK) PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: SCEI (IN-HOUSE) PREVIOUSLY IN: E142, E143, E151



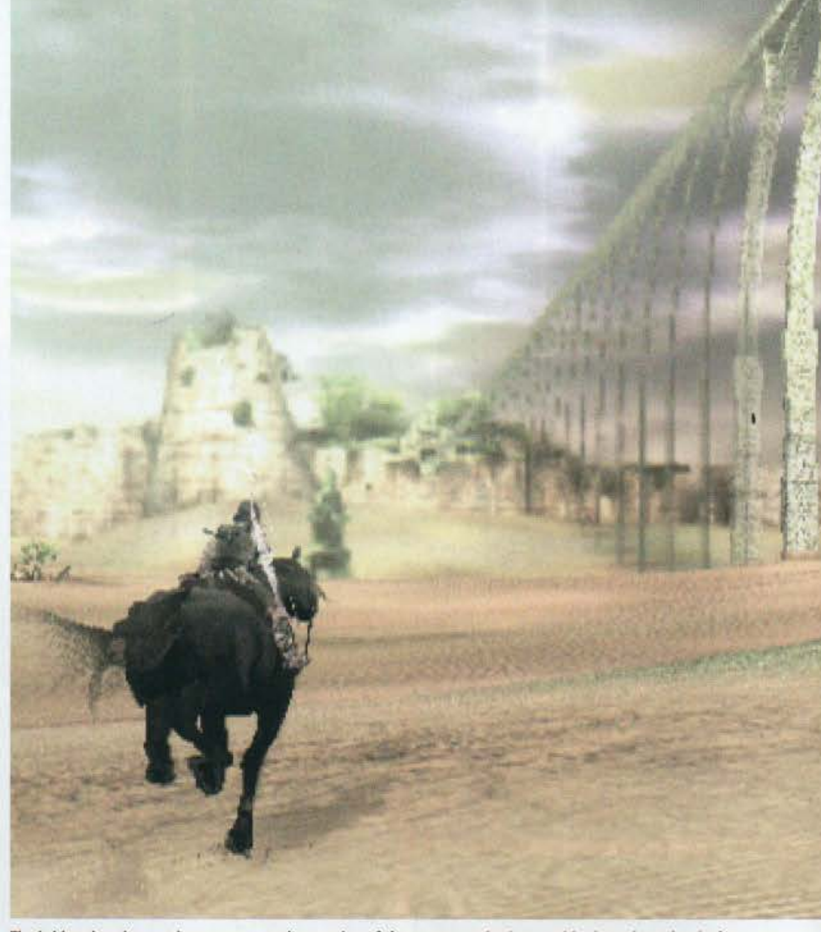


The game's occasional bouts of static platforming are solid and enjoyable, a good middle ground between the discrete precision of the old Prince Of Persia and the fluidity of the new

There are an awful lot of things wrong with *Shadow Of The Colossus*, but they all fall into just two categories. The first are the straightforward things that suffer from Ueda's team having bitten off more than it can chew: the framerate that drops to a dreamy stutter; the adaptive music that jars from one track to another; the platforming control scheme that simply isn't always capable of attaching a moving person to a moving monolith; the camera that fails to match up to the prodigious challenge of keeping both wanderer and colossus in sight at the same time. These are the simple failings of the game, and how much they damage your enjoyment of it will depend rather on your response to the second set of problems – especially since it begins to become apparent they aren't problems at all.

Take Agro, the wanderer's magnificent mount. The detail on his mane and tail may look a little low resolution by current standards, but his overall form and animation are beguiling. He isn't just a convincing portrayal of a horse, he's a convincing portrayal of a specific horse: handsome, weighty and a little intimidating at close quarters. But as soon as you take the reins, it's easy to be disappointed. Control – a basic point'n'squirt system – is clumsy, crude and unpredictable, and his majestic grace is undermined by being banged into cliff walls and tight corners with an ungainly thump. But, as the game's first few hours slip by, something subtle and seductive happens. You learn that Agro isn't badly implemented, just a little badly behaved: headstrong and independent, he isn't always going to go where he's led. You notice that, actually, he's a rather bigger horse than the wanderer seems used to riding, causing him to shift a little side-saddle when left idle, to ease the ache in his hips. You notice that Agro is intelligent enough to manage simple path-finding himself, taking responsibility for both of you across crumbling bridges. And since, by then, the game's overpowering sense of solitude and emptiness has started to sink into your bones, his moments of spirited disobedience are as welcome as his screams of terror when he sees you thrown flying by a lazy swipe of a colossal hand.

Or take the game's stultifying structure: arriving at the central temple structure, it's soon discovered that the wanderer's purpose in this strangely lifeless landscape is to return to life the woman that he loves. To do so, he discovers he must destroy the 16 great colossi that wander its plains and sleep in its caves. Once one is defeated, he is returned automatically to the temple and given his clue to seek out and destroy the next: 16 times over without variation. Finding each is far from simple, but there's no science to the task beyond simply pointing yourself in the right direction and taking the time to traverse the game's almost entirely empty landscape. There's nothing else to find, no interruption in the pace or pattern of search, kill, return. But again, as you relinquish traditional expectations of how videogames work and surrender to the otherworldly atmosphere, this starts to be a story in itself. The space is so vast, the muted beauty of the world so varied and elusive, that travelling through it becomes the tale the game has to tell. The lack of life – aside from the birds which follow your progress like gulls follow a ship and the lizards you can kill to enhance your strength – stops feeling like a lack of detail and more like an expression of the world's oddly dormant state; it becomes hard



The bridge that the wanderer crosses at the opening of the game remains impassable throughout, but is there as a constant landmark – and constant reminder – as the wanderer crosses back and forward below on his grim quest

The space is so vast, the muted beauty of the world so varied and elusive, that travelling through it becomes the tale the game has to tell



Some colossus battles range over huge tracts of open land, while others are confined in buildings or arenas. Even the penned-in fights are momentous, however. There's nothing about this game which isn't vast





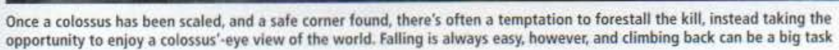






The colossi don't disappoint, even after all the hype, and even when you're cowering in a bunker. Their noise, size and otherworldiness – part building, part machine, part reptile, part animal – make them truly frightening





Once a colossus has been scaled, and a safe corner found, there's often a temptation to forestall the kill, instead taking the opportunity to enjoy a colossus'-eye view of the world. Falling is always easy, however, and climbing back can be a big task







Riding with Agro through the game's woods becomes a relaxing pleasure rather than a clumsy chore once you've learned to let him take the lead in more enclosed areas

to shake the impression that the land itself is watching you, waiting to see how it will be changed by your actions. And that tension is amplified over and over by the looping structure of the game. It was obvious from the first images released that destroying the magnificent colossi was going to be a triumph tempered with regret and guilt, but that anxiety builds to an almost unbearable pitch as you skewer one after the other to their monumental quicks.

But beyond those things – of the rules it breaks through ineptitude and the rules it breaks from a determination to forge something new – there's not much that can be said about *Shadow Of The Colossus*. Not because there aren't pages to be written about the designs of the colossi, the wisdom of some of the puzzles involved in defeating them, or the deliberately ambiguous implications of the story (see 'Bridging the gap'), but because this is a game with so little content that to discuss specifics would be to tarnish an experience that needs to be approached with as few preconceptions as possible. Even the screenshots accompanying this review have been taken to avoid giving more than a couple of hints as to the sights the game contains. This is, as it ought to be, a game like no other before and, as it was always going to be, one that isn't perfect. But an achievement this colossal was always going to cast some shadows of its own. **[8]**

Bridging the gap



Debate will no doubt rage about whether or not *Shadow Of The Colossus* is a direct sequel to *Ico*, although there's no doubt it draws on the same universe. How is the wanderer related to Yorda's young rescuer? Is his magical sword the same one used by Ico's sacrificers to open the castle's gates? Might the terrifying black ichor that fountains from the colossi's wounds be connected to the shadowy realm of the dark Queen? Famitu Ueda has already made it clear you'll need to find your own answers, but there's no question that the story this time around is slighter and more overloaded than *Ico*'s inescapably compelling setup, the characters less sympathetic, and the themes less well-integrated into the gameplay.

Quick kills – rapid-fire, preset QTE attacks that instantly take out unaware enemies – help leaven the combat diet considerably, but the element of stealth they introduce to the game hasn't been sufficiently fine-tuned







Combat is still a bit of a button-masher, especially as the Dark Prince. But smaller numbers of tougher enemies force you to think tactically, vary your moves and dual-wield constantly



Two Thrones' Babylon is a hazy city, sun-drenched, distinctly Arabian and thankfully untroubled by the sound of pumped-up angry rock riffing. It is troubled, however, by the release of the sands of time, and it's no surprise to learn the Prince thinks it's all his fault

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE TWO THRONES

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 25 PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (MONTREAL & CASABLANCA) PREVIOUSLY IN: E156

As the third *Prince Of Persia* in three years pulls you inexorably into its seductive sandtrap, you might – excuse the pun – experience a sinking feeling. But that feeling's hard to place, and not quite what you imagined it might be.

Is it frustration at the indignity of another rush to release, bugged and imbalanced, for this quintessentially graceful series? Hardly. *The Two Thrones* is the most polished *Persia* yet, a surefooted, confident performer with the last few tics of its striking camera soothed away, and its ever uneven, seesawing tempo settled to a reassuringly smooth hum. Its different flavours – acrobatic combat, acrobatic puzzling, acrobatic acrobatics – never clash nor threaten to overwhelm each other as they once did. Only the inconsistent placement of savepoints and checkpoints hints at the rickety *Princes* of old.

Could that feeling be a heavy heart at a second betrayal of *Sands Of Time*'s pure spirit? Perhaps, but would that really be fair? *Warrior Within*'s worst crimes were exclusively aesthetic – its retreat into crass medieval Gothic and petulant rage – and have been largely reversed. It's true that the stunning platforming never scales the cerebral heights it did in the first game – it's too piecemeal, it doesn't have the breathing room. Combat remains significant, though more focused and less frenetic than *Warrior Within*'s, with its new accent on stealth kills. But to damn Ubisoft for not quite following through on the greatest platform game of its generation – for daring to expand on and refine its less perfect elements instead – might be to hold *Sands* unfairly to ransom for the slow death of the genre, the failure of any rivals to step up to its mark.

Is it something less tangible, then – are we disappointed at the erosion of *Prince Of Persia*'s strength of character? This is more like it: *The Two Thrones* is somewhat bland. Its faultlessly pretty looks never steal breath like its predecessors' could, and the powerful unity of place that they both had has evaporated somewhere in Babylon's back alleys. Farah's return as love interest feels forced and charmless, while the Prince himself has been focus tested into oblivion, ending up just another tortured haircut with a demon alter ego.

But that's all pretty superficial, and none of it changes the fact that this is easily the better sequel, a firm improvement on *Warrior Within*. So why the long face? For the simplest and saddest reason of all: ennui. It's not angst over the games' differences, but weariness with their similarities that has worn down our love for *Prince Of Persia*. Year on year, what was once a daredevil iconoclast – and is still a truly great game – is turning into a date-stamped factory product through the simple process of repetition. Please, Ubisoft, give it, and us, a rest. **[7]**

Prince Of Persia's animation is still as peerless as the 1989 original's was in its day, and perfectly synched with those barely audible, exquisitely modulated footstep sounds. Watching a good player leap and dodge can be every bit as enthralling as playing the game yourself

The more it stays the same

With the exception of quick kills, none of the many changes wrought by *The Two Thrones* have a profound effect, but none are superfluous either. The new acrobatic moves – which allow the Prince to lodge his dagger in grating and hang from it, or rebound diagonally off shutters – are minor but allow some spectacularly long, gravity-defying combos to be strung together. The Dark Prince alter ego, an extension of *Warrior Within*'s Sand Wraith with a chain for swinging and spiralling attacks, is not as different a character as you might think; however, his constantly depleting health (refilled by sand) neatly reverses the dynamic, making fights easy and platforming a nervewracking time trial. Chariot chases are scarce and very brief diversions, and as such not wholly objectionable. Overall, it's a lesson in how to provide copious novelty without disturbing a precious balance.





Your time spent playing as Kong is a raw, furious and intensely physical experience, one that is emphatically backed up by deafening sound and some particularly striking camera angles and effects. The framerate stutters like it's 1933, but this suits the action well enough



PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (MONTPELLIER) PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E153

That possessive title was probably just lip service insisted on by some marketing edict, but it is entirely accurate. Ubisoft's Michel Ancel and his team have dedicated themselves to recreating Jackson's vision for King Kong with reverence and humility, moulding the same raw materials into a simple, solid action game designed to serve the story, not transcend it. This is not just licensed product, it is that rarest of things in this medium: an actual, faithful adaptation. It's the film's twin, its reflection, and Jackson's own work will do well to live up to it.

Some words of warning, though. What that means is that this dazzling, determinedly populist experience was not made according to the standards other games are made by, and when judged – or even just described – by those standards, it might seem slender to the point of frailty. It is profoundly linear. Like *Fahrenheit*, *King Kong* offers tremendous freedom to do whatever you want, so long as it's what comes next. Its puzzles are perfunctory and few, used to modify pacing and mood rather than make any substantial contribution to play. It is relatively short and easy, and so eager to let every player live through every moment of high adventure and gentle pathos that it will actually change itself (removing enemies, granting ammunition) should they fail. When it's a firstperson shooter, the aiming is so generous that it's not really about shooting. When it's a platformer, you never fall. There is no health, no inventory, no graphical interface. 'Don't mind me', the game seems to be saying, 'I'm not really here'.

And that is actually a thrilling liberation, because none of it is borne of laziness or oversight. Aiming is vague because the story requires you to use weapons out of panicked self-preservation, not with cool marksmanship, and to rely on resourceful use of your surroundings – baiting, trapping, distracting – more than skill. The Kong sections are so absurdly effortless because he's such a thunderous force of nature that you never should quite feel in control of him. Each decision has been made with the express purpose of tearing down every visual, practical and psychological barrier between the player and the adventure, and making them feel fear, excitement and tenderness, but mostly sheer awe. Awe at the baleful, painterly beauty of Skull Island; at the cold-blooded ferocity of its uncanny wildlife; at the rage and might of Kong and the terrifying size of the T-Rexes; at the flutter in your belly when a polygonal approximation of a pretty actress looks you in the eye. Above all, at the extent to which you feel like you're there.

King Kong is thorough, satisfying and inventive, but without depth or substantial challenge, and less polished (especially in its AI) than it should be. As a piece of game design, it's a sound but small achievement. But visually, viscerally, and, yes, emotionally, it is an absolute giant. **[8]**



Ancel and co's main reference work for *King Kong* was the rich concept art of Jackson's design and effects studio, Weta. The debt is acknowledged with touching affection: unlockable galleries hang these works in 3D, firstperson grottos, to luminous effect

Though he's sometimes alone, there's a refreshing interdependence between hero Jack Driscoll and his companions. But their shaky pathfinding and animation routines occasionally undermine the brilliant voicework and decent likenesses of Jack Black, Naomi Watts et al

Cutscenes are rare, with storytelling handled *Half-Life*-style before your eyes. Ancel's studio reveals a tremendous gift for this technique, framing and pacing heartstopping vistas and set-pieces to perfection without confining movement (unless the story requires it)

Playing a baiting game



You may not feel you need an excuse to revisit this brisk yarn, but Ubi Montpellier has provided you with one anyway. A scoring system rates repertory performances on kills versus deaths, injuries to yourself and your companions, and weapons used (bullets being more costly than spears) – or in the case of Kong's levels, moves attempted and time taken. This unlocks extras and draws the best out of the gameplay, encouraging quick-thinking improvisation with fire and the food chain to eliminate your prey. But the bar for success is set too low: the final, and very worthwhile, extra will be unlocked after average performances in just half the levels available.





STUBBS THE ZOMBIE

FORMAT: MAC, PC, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: $50 (£28) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), FEBRUARY (UK) PUBLISHER: ASPYR DEVELOPER: WIDELOAD GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E149

Amazing stories



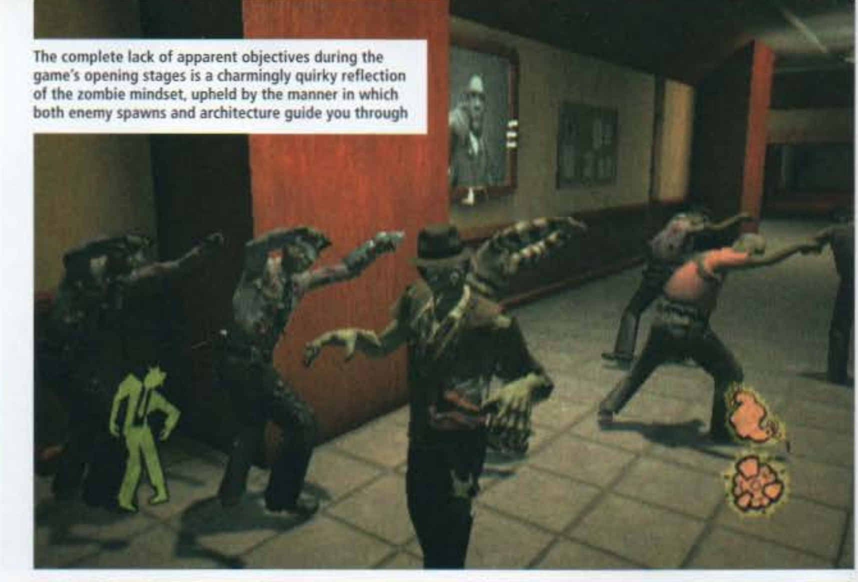
Set in an anachronistic 1959 replete with Frank R Paul-inspired technology, *Stubbs* is an often beautiful yet sometimes mucky sight. Heavy full-frame filtering occasionally makes the game grubbier than it perhaps should be, but elsewhere represents one of the most successful attempts we've seen at mellowing normal-mapped surfaces into something artistically credible. Motion capture has been used to great effect in animating the reanimated, and while Stubbs devours brains with little respite, his stumbling gait and lurching attacks are always magical. Credit also to the game's licensed soundtrack: it's witty and evocative throughout, even though it does wait until the closing stages to reveal its most memorable assets.

The shoes of a zombie aren't the most advisable for a game to occupy, just as shambolic, aimless and repetitive aren't words you'd expect to find wedged between inverted commas and written large on the back of a box. Indeed, even Aspyr itself has gone with the more market-friendly 'Built with the *Halo* engine' instead. Ultimately, however, *Stubbs The Zombie* is a strategically fulfilling day in the afterlife of a fundamentally mindless man. In sticking resolutely to that theme, it readily shoots itself in the foot with cyclical action and missions with meagre flesh on their bones. But it shuffles on regardless, serving up some gut-busting comic moments en route and revelling in a now-famous pattern of 30-second thrills.

Reward in *Stubbs* is watching your demented toxic arsenal confound and overcome adversaries who have no excuse for losing. Introduced as little more than a clumsy swipe and vampiric chomp, your attacks possess a viral after-effect that embellishes the game's theme while turning the run-and-gun tactics of *Halo* upside down. A force of ten gun-toting soldiers, for example, simply cannot be overcome with zig-zagging feet and flailing arms. Lob an explosive intestine into a cluster of them, however, and watch as the bodies fly with gratifying momentum before rising (or crawling if sufficient limbs are missing) into a hilarious undead stupor. Suddenly you're not one but many, your groaning AI posse diverting both attention and gunfire as you opportunistically snack on the next unsuspecting foe. This is a game in which you destroy in order to create, create in order to escalate, and repeat until the balance of power tips in your favour.

With such a template, Wideload has placed a welcome knee in the groin of the status quo, but by taking its subject too lightly it's also failed to turn an adventurous prototype into a durable production. Checkpoints, for example, are noted in unobtrusive *Halo* style, but often at baffling intervals where little has apparently been achieved. Entire set-pieces can be easily circumnavigated, one boss battle broke during our first playthrough, and the game's desire for more structured closure leads to a succession of drab corridors and encounters that somewhat dampens its appeal. The story is kept brief – out of necessity, we dare suggest – and it's a further shame to find that the game's higher difficulty settings offer little beyond the norm. While the provision of twoplayer coop is also a considerate extra, this too is patently superficial.

The comic hit rate, however, is remarkable. Though it delivers a few duds along the way (an impromptu dance-off ably outstaying its welcome), *Stubbs* remains one of the chuckle-out-loud funniest games of recent memory. Little emerges from its characters' mouths that doesn't at least raise a smirk, and the sheer number of aural and visual gags is enough to postpone the inevitable rot and keep it smelling fresh. **[6]**



The complete lack of apparent objectives during the game's opening stages is a charmingly quirky reflection of the zombie mindset, upheld by the manner in which both enemy spawns and architecture guide you through



Punchbowl's exteriors are decidedly more distracting than its sparsely decorated halls, but Stubbs uses opened arteries like watering cans to keep things looking vibrant. The animations used for his fatal chomps possess a grisly beauty that never stales, the let blood remaining caked to the walls and floor



While a pivotal strategy is to neutralise your enemies by robbing them of their brains, latching on to them with your possessive hand grants you control of their weapons, revealing a traditional flipside to the game's subversive design as well as a spot of strategic variety





When he isn't riding a sheep from one level to the next (and also to the point of death), Stubbs can drive many of Punchbowl's civilian and military vehicles with modified *Halo* controls ensuring an intuitive ride

As fighting games are inclined to do, *Calibur* fashions many new faces from the bones of others. Regular boss Abyss is a mutation of Zasalamel, ultimate boss Night Terror is Nightmare, and Olcadan is based on Edgemaster



SOUL CALIBUR III

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 18
PUBLISHER: SONY DEVELOPER: NAMCO PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E153





Intense, immaculate, irritable: at their fiercest, *Calibur*'s bouts are stricken by momentary yet surprising slowdown. Luckily, it very seldom occurs outside of grand animations where, funnily enough, it often adds to the effect

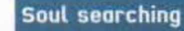
Simultaneously determined and adrift, *Soul Calibur III* has improved as a fighting system while demonstrating a surprising but welcome lack of mercy. Home to a treasure chest of extras laden as much with tin as with gold, however, it's hampered by an unrefined difficulty curve and a raft of often inexplicable incidental changes. Namco hasn't made things easy for either itself or its audience, and its ambitious epic sees a conflict between arcade and home design traditions that adds another war to the game's burgeoning tally.

Visually, the latest stage of history is a leap within its generation, towards which the attractive *Tekken 5* seems a mere stepping stone. The coordination of skybox, scenery, platform texture and special effects is such that, while *DOA4* may tease the mind (insert your chosen innuendo here) with its technical proficiency, *Calibur* instead floods the eyes with immediate beauty. Much of that is, of course, attributable to a flamboyant signature art style, but since when has such opulence been something easily, convincingly rendered in games? This is a technical marvel, and the routine appearance of that phrase in coverage of modern triple-A PS2 titles is equally worthy of note.

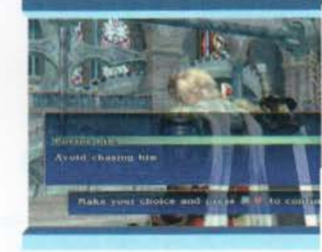
Less predictably, however, the first *Soul Calibur* to debut on console also marks the point at which Namco has chosen, mechanically at least, to shred the associated rulebook. Its story mode – Tales Of Souls – dictates its difficulty settings to the player rather than vice versa, spiking halfway and remaining merciless to the end. Put simply, you *need* a decent stick (or a god among pads) to facilitate the split-second Just Impacts, Ukemis and sidesteps that consistent victory demands. This, more than abundant content, is the game's defining improvement – one to snap you out of the sleepwalk by which most Namco fighters are conquered in singleplayer.

And we should be mightily thankful, because elsewhere the series' customary fluff has been packed into the widest variety of modes yet, but somehow lacks any real substance. The worst offender in this regard is sadly the bravest, Chronicles Of The Sword being a faux tabletop strategy mode that, together with its conjoined character-creation mode, shatters a tightly worked ensemble of character designs and abilities into a sprawl of unsatisfying component pieces. Namco's desire to maximise its fighting titles' lifespans is laudable as always, but this time the implementation has misfired. An additional costume or two for the main characters would have been preferable, especially when such sumptuous and inviting backdrops have been provided to frame the action.

Soul Calibur III is still great, because in all the ways that are truly important to its genre it excels. While singleminded acquisition of its frivolous wardrobe will ironically leave you empty in the end, a dedicated embrace of its fighting soul will instead share with you its power. **[8]**



Soul searching



Freed from an efficient arcade template, *Calibur*'s story mode has wandered into suitably bombastic territory with a text-driven tree of routes for each character and intermittent QTE cutscenes. The emphasis is clearly on single-credit completions, the consequences of a botched button press (typically a halved or gradually depleted energy bar in the subsequent match) alleviated in the event of a continue. Only by avoiding defeat throughout, however, will you stand a chance of meeting the game's true boss – Night Terror. Though the encounters with such special characters and challenges that pepper each quest add flavour, the inability to skip cutscenes and the brutal, rather than graceful, rise in difficulty also sour the taste.



Tira (above left) is the worst of the three new characters, as much due to her visual design as her range of moves and attributes. Zasalamel and Setsuka, on the other hand, are stronger entrants, the former occupying many of the game's cutscenes and dominating the stories of its other characters





GUITAR HERO

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $70 (INCLUDES GUITAR) (£40)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: RED OCTANE
DEVELOPER: HARMONIX PREVIOUSLY IN: E156

Face value



Guitar Hero is the next in line in Harmonix's attempts to humanise its music games. After the abstract austerity of *Frequency*, and the rather more gimmicky characters in *Amplitude*, *Guitar Hero* lets you choose your rock god (or goddess) from a roster of varied characters, each with their own rock moves and style. Nonetheless, they remain a little uncharismatic, outclassed by the elaborately imagined stages on which they perform and the exuberance of the poster art which forms the rest of the game's brilliant graphical design.

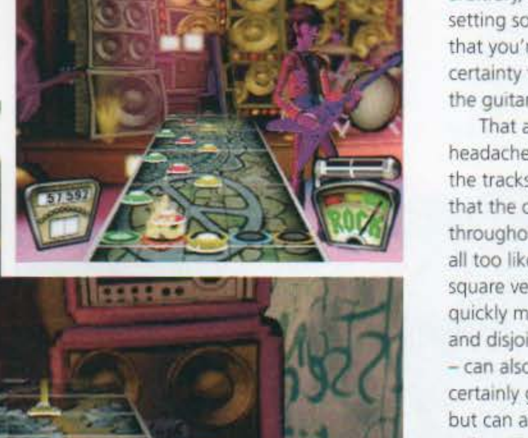
One of the reasons people claim games aren't art is that they don't help you learn anything about yourself. Now that *Guitar Hero* exists, they'll have to change their tune. You don't learn anything profound, but you do learn how your inner rock god looks and moves and sounds. Through a solid and handsome guitar peripheral, Harmonix's traditionally sensitive adaptation of melody and a selection of 30 cover-version hits from the likes of Motörhead, Blue Öyster Cult, The Ramones and Boston, you'll discover whether you're a squealer or a yeller, a wide-striding groover or a bolt-upright pogo-er. This is a game that you can play sitting down, but you won't. Not once.

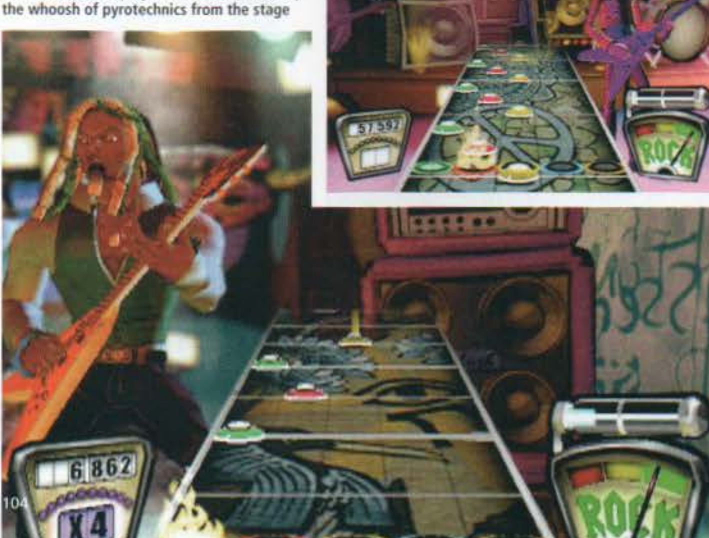
The framework is extremely familiar to any veteran of *Frequency* or *Amplitude*. Notes, corresponding to fret buttons on the guitar, travel down a lane toward you. Hit them right and you'll build up a combo; nail down sequences and you'll earn score-boosting power-ups. The peripheral will also be extremely familiar to players of *Guitar Freaks* – a replica with fret buttons and a central strum bar. The combination, however, produces something entirely distinct. The peripheral outclasses that available for *Guitar Freaks*: with five buttons, a two-way strum bar and a fully functional whammy, it encourages over-the-top performances. But, as ever, it's Harmonix's musical instinct that makes *Guitar Hero* special. For each of the four difficulty levels, the guitar lines – from some huge power-chords to delicately picked blues – are atomised into clever colour-coded approximations. No matter how simplified, note patterns never feel arbitrary, and on the extreme difficulty setting so accurately mirror the real thing that you're left with the unshakeable certainty that you now know how to play the guitar for real.

That authenticity gives Harmonix headaches, however. The digital nature of the tracks in *Amplitude* and *Frequency* meant that the challenge was close to constant throughout each song. In *Guitar Hero*, you're all too likely to get a song which has a four-square verse/chorus/verse section that is quickly mastered, followed by a pyrotechnic and disjointed solo which – while spectacular – can also produce an instant game over. It certainly gives a real dynamic to each level, but can also produce frustrating difficulty spikes. The scoring system also seems more arbitrary than the visual arithmetic offered by the previous games. It could choke off what is otherwise one of the most euphoric and self-indulgent videogaming experiences ever made, but, happily, the structure makes all the songs available from the off, saving the unlockables for music from unsigned bands and local talent from Harmonix's home town of Boston.

In the end, the things that disappoint you about *Guitar Hero* prove its brilliance. You're disappointed it doesn't come as a boxset of every rock track ever recorded. You're disappointed there isn't a *Bass Hero*, *Drum Hero* and *Karaoke Hero* so you can form a band with your friends. You're disappointed your living room doesn't have flash-pots and a smoke machine. Although now, there's no reason why it shouldn't. **[8]**







All the band members animate in time to the music – not that you're often able to tear your eyes off the central lane to see them. Improving your Rock rating triggers a more enthusiastic response from the crowd and is enormously satisfying when accompanied by the whoosh of pyrotechnics from the stage





Holding the guitar vertically triggers a bonus multiplier (thanks to an in-built tilt sensor) but comes at the cost of turning all the notes blue, upping the challenge level



As your career, and the popularity of your band, improves, so do the venues you play in. From the initial dingy basement to lavish stadium, via old-fashioned concert halls, each has its own atmosphere, audience and range of special effects



At the heart of the game's challenge is a simple inequation: five buttons, four fingers. Although easier songs will only use three buttons, harder difficulties require you to frequently and fluidly reposition your hand



One of *Gun*'s finer judgements is its tone: it's more Peckinpah than spaghetti, with an unsentimental revisionist streak and refreshingly appropriate gore and swearing. Sermonising on the plight of the Native American is a bit of a reach, mind

GUN

FORMAT: 360, GC, PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 (360 £50)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (360 TBC) PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT PREVIOUSLY IN: E153

Think about these two words in isolation for a second: free roam. Could there be a concept in gaming that's more in tune with the legend of the wild west? Wide skies, badlands without borders or laws – just a horse, the horizon, your wits and your wanderlust to guide you. It's as astonishing that it's not been attempted before as it is disappointing that Neversoft's would-be western epic, so golden in conception, turns out to have feet of clay and no frontier spirit of its own.

It's hard to fault on paper: *Gun*'s sins are several, but they're never those of omission. Its storyline professionally – and, it must be said, artfully – compiles every cliché in the book. Young hunter Cole, drawn into protecting his whiskery father's secrets from a civil war general turned railroad magnate, gets the chance to play ranch hand, bounty hunter, card sharp and defender of golden-hearted hookers, among other things. He ambushes trains, rides shotgun and shoots from both saddle and hip.

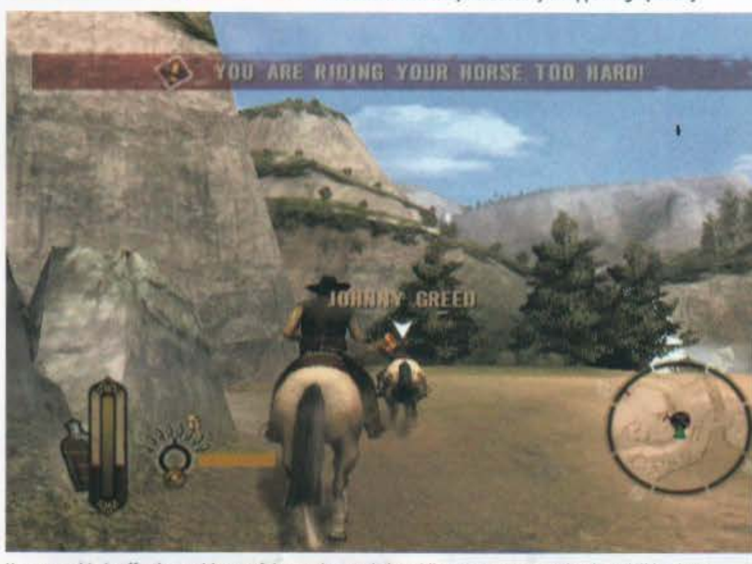
It sounds like all the western you could wish for. In fact, it's more than you can stomach. *Gun* has its cake and eats it to the extent that Cole is slaughtering the wicked Apache one minute and going native with noble braves the next. The side missions through which he upgrades his stats – and earns money which can be spent, exclusively, on upgrading his stats – are so thoughtlessly strewn across the narrative that he can be deputy sheriff and escaped convict simultaneously.

Bows and arrows are vital for stealthy kills – apparently so silent that guards don't notice when the men they're standing talking to drop dead. Enemies' behaviour is far from sophisticated but they can use cover effectively





Character designs vary from charismatic leads to rough clones, animation from lifelike subtlety to jerky puppetry. But it's the textureless, unreal environments and cardboard townships that really disappoint graphically



Horsemanship is effortless, with a useful trample attack, but riding your mount too hard can kill it. Since bounties are worth more alive than dead, shooting their horses out from under them is an ugly necessity

This thematic gluttony could easily be forgiven if *Gun* had been realised with any romance or conviction, but it's no more than a dogged canter through the wild west checklist. Side missions are bland and unimaginative. The rich dialogue and heavyweight voice talent are undermined by clumsy timing and crude visuals. Worst of all, the world itself is painfully drab: a plastic, barren miniature severely lacking in life and ambient detail, even in its towns. Why roam freely (when the game lets you, which is by no means always) when all that's out there to find is an empty trek between jarring episodes of production-line gaming?

Strip away all the dead weight and unfulfilled promises – or rather, promises fulfilled, but carelessly and through duty, not love – and you're left with a quite reasonable thirdperson shooter. The controls may be somewhat fussy, without feel and poorly mapped, but the armoury is temptingly stocked, the carnage grimly satisfying. *Gun* picks up momentum after a few hours, showing some true grit when the plot calls for it. But unfocused as it is, its small strengths stranded in a wasteland world, this drifter is left fumbling for its weapon long after more dedicated gunslingers, like Rockstar's *Red Dead Revolver*, have blown the smoke from the barrel. **[5]**

Ways of the Gun



Cole is always equipped with a pistol, a melee weapon and a few explosives to throw. A second gun slot is occupied either by rifle, shotgun, sharpshooter or bow, and these are awkward to switch between. Magazine capacity and reload time are paramount considerations, varying even between different weapons of the same class, and you will need to duck and lean around cover to succeed, since circling enemies only works on horseback. The rationed, time-dilated quickdraw mode is vital in crowd-control situations, allowing instant target selection with a flick of the stick, and it's the game's most brutally entertaining feature, too.



MARIO KART DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 25
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E152

Coffee and MK



To get your DS online you'll need your own wireless point or access to one of the BT Openzone or The Cloud points through which Nintendo has arranged free wi-fi access. These can be located in branches of McDonald's and Coffee Republic, and access points are also being installed in game shops. Once online, you can search for worldwide opponents, or for rivals of a similar ability to yourself. To add people to your friends roster, you'll need to swap friend codes in real life – all part of Nintendo's obsessively safety-conscious approach. Its inexperience in running online services does show – it's impossible to choose specific friends to race with, for example, and quitting out of races is extremely awkward – but overall it's a confident debut.

Nintendo has been out of the online race for so long it's hard to remember how natural it would once have been for it to have led it. For this company, gaming has always been social – whether it's putting four ports on its consoles, or hearing Miyamoto relish how *Zelda*'s trickier puzzles force players into collaborative communication. And Nintendo has always pushed new technology, and has proven often enough how much it likes selling its customers extra add-ons. And now, trailing in the wake of the Dreamcast, Xbox Live and download packs for *Wipeout Pure* comes *Mario Kart DS*, Nintendo's first serious worldwide push into the world of online gaming.

It's a point worth stressing, because it's a game you forget the significance of as soon as the pips count down for your first race, the engines rev and *that* music kicks in. Never just a nostalgia trip, *Mario Kart* is nonetheless a game which carries a heavy heritage of happy memories and idle afternoons. Instantly familiar, and instantly entertaining, Nintendo could hardly have picked a better title for its wi-fi debut.





Although the handling is a little more forgiving than in previous *Mario Karts*, it's still full of subtleties. As well as including the boost created by wiggling out of a powerslide, there's also the possibility of slipstreaming another kart until you gain enough speed to slingshot past it, crowing







The lower screen is used only visually, displaying a remarkably accurate map which tracks each player and all items. It's an essential tool for preserving your first place and makes surviving the view-splodging effects of Blooper oil attacks easy

Nor is this a simple clone. The most useful shorthand might be to say it does for the *Mario Kart 64* what *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* did for the SNES original. Containing four Grands Prix of new tracks and four Grands Prix of classics (each a set of SNES, N64, GBA and GC tracks), it uses the game's traditional tight handling to produce races that are slower and more belligerent than the originals. The expanded arsenal produces bruising action; it's all too easy to be sent from first to eighth (although mysteriously much harder to cruise from eighth to first). But, as with the original, the game's obvious interventions to keep the race tight never feel unfairly unfair: the jostling, jockeying atmosphere it creates is reward enough.

The new tracks are the strongest new *Mario Kart* tracks for some time. Many, such as those based on *Super Mario 64*'s Tick Tock Clock, are spectacularly gimmicky, but work very well with the tighter, more combat-heavy racing style. Battle mode has also had a successful overhaul, and both can be shared with DS owners who don't own the game. The new mission mode, designed to enhance the singleplayer game (collect a set number of coins, drive through gates, destroy Monty Moles, etc), palls fairly quickly, but does act as a useful tutorial for mastering some of the finer points of the handling.

All this alone would be enough to mark *Mario Kart* out as one of the DS's stronger titles, but Nintendo's new WFC service looks to deliver everything Nintendo promised it would: slick, easy, safe and free, early trials had us configured and hooked up with players in the US in just a minute or two. It may be late to the online party, but Nintendo is making a very stylish entrance. **[8]**







Making the classic tracks fit the new handling and dynamics of the DS version can't have been an easy task, but for the most part they're extremely successful. The *Double Dash* tracks suffer the most, not least because they were geared for a style of play that was most distant from the original. Nonetheless it's a wide selection, and the new tracks do well to hold their own





The most enjoyable sub-missions are the familiar ones: vigilante tasks, races and taxi rides. New attractions include a stint as a bike/car salesman, plus a firstperson ride on the back of a bike, shooting allocated targets. Both are interesting, but can prove frustrating

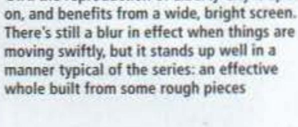




GRAND THEFT AUTO: LIBERTY CITY STORIES

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR GAMES DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR LEEDS/NORTH
PREVIOUSLY IN: E154, E155

This is *GTA* running on a PSP, but not just any *GTA*: the reproduction of Liberty City is spot on, and benefits from a wide, bright screen. There's still a blur in effect when things are moving swiftly, but it stands up well in a manner typical of the series: an effective whole built from some rough pieces



The game's radio stations are peppered with dialogue that is typical of the *GTA* series. Unfortunately, voicework exchanged between characters in cutscenes is horribly compressed, the hiss made even worse with headphones

While the *GTA* franchise has set an entire agenda for console games in recent years, *Liberty City Stories* simply meets one: that of wedging a PS2 attraction into a slimmer format with a different approach to play, and a limited control scheme. While there's little praise to be given for originality here (except, perhaps, for multiplayer – see 'Multipli-city Stories'), there's a lot to be said for the quality of the realisation. This is modern-day *GTA*, functioning successfully on a PSP, warts and all.

While missions are somewhat brisker than usual, they still carry hallmarks of frustration and occasionally poor design, but also retain the smug buzz that comes from plotting a new strategy and executing it. As far as those of the story mode go, there are some definite highlights, but also plenty of lowlights. This is when the game's core kicks in to save the day: timewasting in the city is, thankfully, still more fun than wasting time on some of the poorer missions, allowing the player to recharge their patience and keep coming back for more. And prowling around what is essentially *GTA III*'s city isn't so much a boring retread as a welcome reunion – the addition of motorbikes alone is enough to encourage a celebratory wheelie-tour of the city's districts. But it's all here: the hoi polloi, the ambience, the weather, the police presence, and the emergent scenarios that can make you feel special or wretched. It feels familiar, but remains primed for fresh exploration and mischief, reapplying a formula that still feels superior to its imitators' approaches.

While bike handling is nearly ideal on the PSP's analogue stick, its cars are skittish compared to their console equivalents. The control setup as a whole packs in plenty of functionality, but sometimes clumsily so; looking left and right while driving a vehicle, requiring the use of the left shoulder button, is bearable, but the system for accessing precision aiming just isn't practical, reducing combat to the use of a typically weak lock-on system. Character movement, however, is improved over both *Vice City* and *GTA III*, due to there being some sensation of weight.

Liberty City Stories isn't trying to do anything truly new, and instead focuses on implementing some elaborate and well-established ideas and making them work neatly on a handheld. Which manages to remain a refreshing experience, because it still works, and it's still significant fun. It's a small-screen regurgitation that's easily on a par with *Burnout Legends*, and serves as a prime example of what the PSP is capable of, not what all of its games should try to become in the next few years. **[8]**



Liberty City Stories' lead character Toni Cipriani inherits a wealth of costumes as the game progresses – simple outfits that aren't as elaborate as those of *San Andreas*' wardrobe but, also, not nearly as clumsy to access. Hidden package collections, unique stunt jumps and rampages all return to prolong the game's lifespan, if only for those with stamina

Multipli-city Stories



It's a luxury that PC owners have had access to for some time, and was tapped somewhat by the coop mode of *San Andreas*, but *Liberty City Stories* offers dedicated multiplayer for up to six players. Huge portions of the gameworld are available, instead of the perfunctory arena design that too many action games fall back on for the obligatory deathmatch option. Seven equally attentive play modes exist, including limousine defence and capture in Protection Racket and Get Stretch, respectively. Meanwhile, Tanks For The Memories – keep possession of a tank for as long as possible – is happy to let players revel in the game at its most destructive.





RATCHET: GLADIATOR

FORMAT: **PS2** PRICE: **£40** RELEASE: **OUT NOW** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E155**

Just in case the title hadn't made it clear, this isn't *Ratchet & Clank* any more. No more gadget-swapping, no more minigames, no more slight diversions in the form of Clank's sedate explorations. It's now a game for those who revelled in *Ratchet & Clank 3*'s deathmatch arenas and its online battles, and who played the game through twice, upgrading every weapon and savouring its murderous arsenal. Those who valued the adventuring aspect of the series, however, will find *Gladiator* to be too dumb, too similar and just too singlemindedly obsessed with ballistics for it to be a true continuation of it.

Still, *Gladiator* has been streamlined in some less bullish and more universally welcome ways. The need to slot guns and devices in and out of *R&C*'s hotswap inventory rings is gone, as Ratchet's hookshot is now a prudently context-sensitive function of the fire button, and some of the gimmickier weapons of the series – morph rays and Bouncers, for example – can be integrated into each gun as a secondary effect, thanks to Omega mods. When these are bolted on to a weapon, their power grows significantly, and the spectacle on offer is nothing less than tremendous, each round igniting the screen and lashing out with a lightshow of vivid destruction. But the sacrifice for the dazzling pyrotechnics of each shootout are the environments which, while never anything less than fluid in motion and effortless in their scale, feel dank and lacking when compared to the more memorable backdrops of previous *R&C* games.



During the game's second playthrough, which sees the emergence of ever more powerful weapons, the blaze of the fracas evolves to a whole new level. The fact that the game's solo campaign works in splitscreen coop is further testament to its technical strength

This aside, there's no denying this is one of the premier thirdperson shooters on PS2, one whose gunplay is conveyed through some truly dazzling visual feedback and blare. But, once the smoke clears, it feels all too repetitive in terms of its deathmatch-style objectives. *Gladiator* leaves absolutely no question of Insomniac's ability to bend the PS2 to its will in a manner that few other studios can match, but there are doubts about the wisdom of where that will has taken the studio's latest *Ratchet* game. **[7]**



Both the Hovership and Landstalker – a stomping, arachnid attack machine – use multiple lock-ons, *Panzer Dragoon*-style, as their secondary firepower, and devastatingly so. Each of the game's four vehicles is simple and satisfying to use. In terms of graphics and audio, meanwhile, this is everything you'd expect from Insomniac



THE WARRIORS

FORMAT: **PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX** PRICE: **£30**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR TORONTO** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E154**







The character models (left) are great, the incidental presentational touches (top right) even better. When the game's story finally catches up with the events from the movie, taking in its infamous scenes (top left) becomes a treat

When you first heard that Rockstar was making a game based on The Warriors, and if you'd been paying attention to what the New York-based publisher has been doing these past few years, chances are the game you immediately pictured in your head is more or less exactly what it's turned out to be. You pictured the shadowy yet vibrant presentation, the atmosphere driven by gurgling analogue synths, the snappy dialogue and the grubby textures – and, at the centre of it all, a lot of running around busting heads.

Rockstar isn't known for delivering the predictable, but that is what has happened here. *The Warriors*' brand of combat will be familiar to anyone who's played a fighting game of this ilk, and this immediately limits its ability to engage on any significantly new level, leaving the peripheral detail – the things you do when you're not punching, kicking, grappling or maiming your pursuers with weapons – to make this something more than just another generic rumble with a particularly keen lust for blood.

In this regard, *The Warriors* is hit and miss. Being required to rotate a stick four times in succession in order to release the four screws holding a car stereo in place and therefore steal it (for cash, which can be used to buy energy-replenishing 'flash' or cans of spraypaint) rapidly becomes a chore – there is, after all, no skill involved – while the grafitti diversions, which involve tracing simple lines, again with a stick, offer no memorable challenge. It's when the game is at its most *GTA*-like that it comes alive, conjuring up scenarios that take in whole city boroughs and throwing at you multiple groups of adversaries and challenges you have to juggle on the fly… and then you get to a tediously engineered boss encounter and it all begins to get tiresome again.

But, though it's based on a simple, 93-minute movie, Rockstar has grafted an ample amount of meat on to these bones, and the game's central hub, which, among other attractions, allows you to take on missions which flesh out a backstory, is expertly implemented. There's even a workable twoplayer coop mode. And there's no question that *The Warriors* is faithful to its source: its jerkin-wearing antiheroes are adoringly rendered and voiced, the soundtrack is spot on, the locations have that grimy '70s New York flavour… it just feels *authentic* in a way you don't imagine any publisher other than Rockstar would have neither the determination nor energy to achieve. Ultimately, then, the best thing to do with *The Warriors* is treat it like its inspiration and rent it for a weekend. **[6]**



THE MATRIX: PATH OF NEO

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX
PRICE: £40 (PS2, XBOX), £30 (PC) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: SHINY PREVIOUSLY IN: E152, E155



The airborne battle with Agent Smith is sadly the game's most restrictive, the characters locked in a 2D plane of attack. Visually, the scene is a PS2 knockout and, for the most part, is unaffected by slowdown

Never less than interesting, often clever and sometimes even exciting, *The Path Of Neo* is nonetheless as messy and fragile a game as you're ever likely to complete – an over-ambitious, over-produced take on more Matrix canon than a developer could hope to handle. Opting for the seldom-seen combination of simple geometry and high-resolution textures, its looks can both horrify and astonish within the space of a single frame, and its action offers a similarly bittersweet blend of enthralling capability and deadening detachment. As chaotic and unrefined as it is, however, it motors on with definite purpose and provides a solid sense of fulfilment, if not necessarily one of accomplishment.

As to its foremost achievements – the clue is in the title. A devoted chronicle of its hero's journey, it wisely avoids the events it knows it can't adequately portray while readily ploughing into the unwritten black of *Neo*'s off-screen story. Newly penned material slots smartly into the pre-existing framework, bearing a strong Wachowski signature and effortlessly expanding upon supporting characters and locations. Interestingly, the ravages of time (and a jaded public, perhaps) have smoothed the series' furrowed brow. Escalating throughout *Neo* is a sense that the Wachowskis are not only laying their creation to rest, but are comfortable enough with the idea to do so with a wink and smile.

What you have to ask yourself, however, is whether you're enough of a fan to weather the game's significant shortcomings. Most at fault is the framerate, dropping heavily for approximately a third of its duration. Combat has climbed a mountain in bringing essentially all of Neo's abilities to the player, but the grinding performance of the engine and its lack of cohesion when snapping together various motion-captured animations renders it incapable of providing a consistent challenge, reducing its playing style to a dizzying fit of prompted button mashes, lax dodges and wild gunfire. In Architect-speak, Shiny's recalcitrant aspirations and positive prodigality have fashioned a game attenuated by ineluctable infirmities. Vis-à-vis, defective. **[5]**



Considering how well *Path Of Neo* spreads gunplay and fisticuffs across the PS2 controller, an unstable camera, routine glitches and framerate dips are bitter pills to swallow



PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£17) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151



The touchscreen interface is largely superfluous and, for all but the final case, serves only to make things faster rather than enabling otherwise impractical interactions. It's still a welcome renovation, however







Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney (or *Finger Of The North Star* as we're inclined to call it) remains as simultaneously charming, incomparable and inconsistently engaging on DS as it was in its native territory, on its previous format. With the exception of a new and technically adventurous fifth case, this is the GBA's *Gyakuten Saiban* remade, localised for the west and given a touchscreen interface. But the setup/payoff pattern of investigation and courtroom cross-examination remains fresh: characters appear at different one- and two-screen locations, shuffling to and fro in a strict timeline of events and conversations that the player's interaction keeps in motion.

With nothing more than a handful of simple animations, catchy tunes and a few hundred lines of text, *Wright* exhibits genuinely adept comic timing – something vastly better-equipped games typically cannot. Its ability to bridge and embellish primary storylines with secondary ones is also admirable, while its hilariously balmy characters serve as an endlessly effective foil to the dry logic of Wright himself. Even before you consider the abundant text, this is already a fantastic example of localisation, the regional alterations subtle, the dialogue translated so as to not only retain its meaning but also make its humour appreciable by an audience with differing tastes.

But as well as *Wright* simulates the jocular oneupmanship of matinee legal drama, it seldom placates concerns that it again *simulates* rather than replicates the underlying deductive processes. It's bound by its lengthy cases and lack of replay value to keep the player moving forward, seldom posing a challenge that can't be overcome by basic common sense or, at worst, a process of elimination. It too often asks for a mere nod in the right direction rather than a decisively considered gambit, filling in the incriminating details itself and leaving the player yearning for more active involvement. It certainly isn't the first case of a game holding its player's hand too tightly, but thankfully it's a difficult one to dismiss or, indeed, to adjourn. **[7]**





A body of evidence gradually fills your inventory during the course of investigative days, but the use of it in court can be a tiringly inflexible act





SONIC RUSH

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 25
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

Sonic on the DS? That's got to be bad news. Some kind of touchscreen scrubbing gimmick, no doubt, or a section where you have to blow on him to speed him up. It's an easy assumption to make. Sega's own determination to experiment with the brutally simple core of the *Sonic* games, combined with the DS's tempting array of odd input systems, could very easily have ended in tears. Instead, it ends where it always ought to: in speed.

Sonic Rush, for the most part, is a resolutely straightforward race from left to right, through backdrops that are as unmistakably *Sonic* as they are vividly fresh. Spread across two screens, they fill out the long ribbon of green and blue which was once Sonic's raceway, providing scope for giant switchbacks, preposterous loop-the-loops and a hedgehog-warren of alternate routes and secret switches. Controls are tight, the music sparkling and all feels right with the *Sonic* world for the first time in quite a while.

Not that the DS is neglected. Bonus stages see you sweep Sonic around a halfpipe racetrack with the stylus, and the game takes advantage of the machine's processing power to add 3D flourishes to the levels, and full 3D bosses to the ends of each stage. DS download play lets you race another player through each level, which



Sonic's traditional rolling hills soon give way to Las Vegas skylines, Egyptian temples and, yes, a battleship. Occasional 3D touches, like a loading crane that swings Sonic out of the screen, add a welcome new touch of flair to an old formula

proves as satisfying a form of game-sharing as ever. The story is typically *Sonic*-simple (Robotnik plus Chaos Emeralds equals mayhem), but for once the scripting and voice acting aren't too agonisingly saccharine. New character Blaze the Cat adds some real charisma and flair to *Sonic*'s now bloated and unlikeable character roster, and accomplishes that rare feat of being almost as much fun to play as Sonic himself is.

And, as such, *Sonic Rush* is an instant classic: not in the sense that it will stand tall for decades to come as the best of its kind, but in the sense that it instantly shares the same atmosphere and pleasure as the original *Sonic* classics did 15 years ago, even if it does little to move them forward. **[7]**



Stopping for fights is always less fun than speeding through, but higher scores mean better grades. Points can also be racked up by performing aerial acrobatics during high jumps – Blaze is particularly adept here



GUNSTAR SUPER HEROES

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: $30 (£25) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: TREASURE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E154









Black is back, his Dice Palace now an enormous, well-guarded fortress, with a few throwbacks to the original such as the ankle-high Minion Soldier, and new chutes and circular boardgame paths should you toss the wrong number

If it is indeed true that series veteran programmer Hideyuki Suganami wasn't allowed to play the original *Gunstar Heroes* during the development of its sequel, it's proof positive of his photographic memory, as *Gunstar Super Heroes* pays homage not so much to classic side-on shooters as it does its own legacy.

Throughout the course of its levels you'll meet up with a number of old friends, old bosses, everything straight down to an updated visit to Gunstar's Dice Palace. As with the Mega Drive original, *Super Heroes* ekes every last bit of trickery from the GBA, from the pseudo-3D flying levels to Treasure's signature towering multi-sprite and miniscule one-block enemies, resulting in one of the portable's most consistently visually arresting games.

But that's where the similarities end. In sharp contrast to the original's



Levels such as this chick rescue show Treasure's sense of humour and its grasp of the hardware, as you run through a freely-rotating jungle maze

mix-and-match ammo types, *Super Heroes* instead gives both heroes a signature gun and access to two others, all of which have a gauged charged blast. While the conservation of charged shots adds a layer of depth to the game and puts more of an emphasis on an upgraded melee combat mechanic, the loss of weapon combo types does away with a level of unpredictability that gave the first game a good deal of its replayability.

Additionally, all of the title's technical glitz comes at the cost of the inclusion of multiplayer, which stops short one of the primary draws of the original, and of arcade shooters in general, making the experience woefully lonely. And after completing the game with any character at any level, all that's left is for the player is a second or third run through again to pick up scattered few scraps of story dialogue, or attempt to hone levels for shortest times and top scores.

The upper difficulties offer an exceptional challenge, and on the first playthrough (which can easily clock in at under an hour) offer enough marvel to make *Super Heroes* a thrilling ride, but with so little strategic variety, and without the benefit of multiplayer, a certain sameness takes hold and unfortunately cuts short what could have been a fantastic portable shooter resurgence. **[6]**

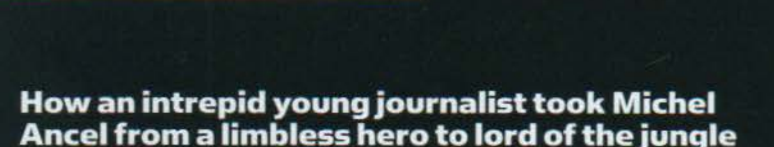

PlayStation.2
Hyllis



TIME EXTEND

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (MONTPELLIER)
ORIGIN: FRANCE
RELEASE DATE: 2003



How an intrepid young journalist took Michel Ancel from a limbless hero to lord of the jungle

One of the side effects of games being such strange creatures is that they often get remembered for the most incidental things. For every masterpiece celebrated for the worlds it creates, the new mechanics it defines or the visual techniques it pioneers, there are half-a-dozen oddballs remembered because of some quirk of their attract mode, a particularly bizarre bug or a faintly obscene Easter egg. But a greater rarity is a game that will go down in history for something that has nothing to do with any of the code on its disc, but everything to do with someone else's reaction to it.

Beyond Good & Evil has a lot of code that it should be remembered for: the code that renders the lively haze of its world, Hillys; the code that governs its heroine Jade's lithe animations; the code which underpins its subtle storytelling techniques. But its place in videogame history wasn't assured until Ubisoft announced that it was through playing this game that Peter Jackson, then the undisputed king of the box office, had chosen the creator he wanted to work on the game of his next film, King Kong. It was an announcement that bore clear trails of having been spun by a series of PR offices, but at the heart of it was something rare and wonderful. Here was a man at the peak of the world's biggest entertainment industry finally taking games seriously. Not just seriously as an economic avenue, or a branding exercise, or a marketing ploy, but as a creative endeavour.

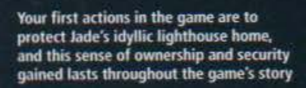
So what was it about the adventures of an elfin lighthouse-keeper that made Jackson think Ancel could tame a two-ton gorilla? On the surface it seems a peculiar choice, but while Jade and Kong could hardly be more different, it was exactly because of what Ancel had accomplished with his heroine that Jackson was interested in the first place. Toby Gard, in an odd respect the keeper of videogames' feminist flame, praised her in an interview in **E**156 as the only post-Lara female lead to have real individuality and character. It's a fair point – game heroines are still a rarity, and it's rarer still for them not to be aggressively sexualised. Jade, with her sensible trousers and serious frown, is a breed apart from the off. She's instantly her own woman, with her own job and her own style, whose desirability comes from her beauty and depth of character rather than the depth of her cleavage. With one skilled piece of design, Ancel and his team make you care about her, and since she cares about the fate of her world, you care too. That shock of black hair and slash of green lipstick at once give you a sense of your place in the world, define your purpose in the game and provide motivation for seeing the story through to the end.

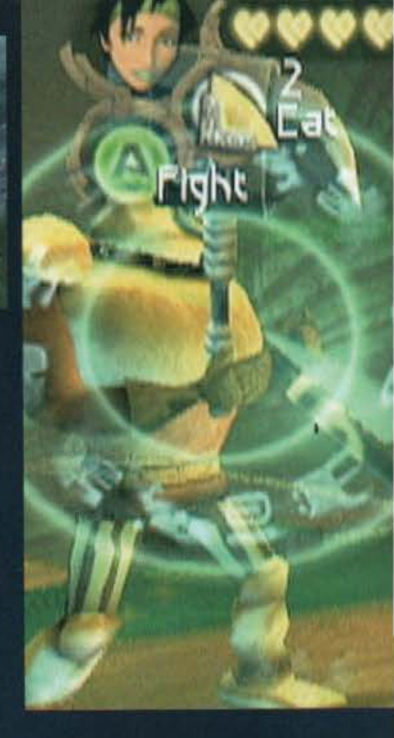
So what was it about the adventures of an elfin lighthouse-keeper that made Jackson think Ancel could tame a two-ton gorilla?

And that, surely, should answer the question as to what Jackson saw: a game-maker whose skills as a character designer, world creator and storyteller made him a perfect match for the world of film. Except, on closer inspection, it's clear that *Beyond Good & Evil* doesn't deliver a story to match Jade's initial appeal. The plot – of a world terrorised by aliens and protected by a brutal and totalitarian army – points towards a story with the darkness and moral ambiguity suggested by the title, but instead unfolds into a fairly mundane world-in-peril game scenario. There is a promising moment of sophistication which occurs when Jade first falls in with the 'terrorists' who claim the army is in league with the invaders: who should she believe? The army that claims to protect her or the resistance fighters who claim everything she knows is a lie? However, this uncertainty lasts a few minutes at best, as the army is soon revealed to be a legion of green-faced, mad-voiced child-catchers. Jade herself is a simple photojournalist who can't hope to overthrow these oppressors by force. Instead, she must use her camera to collect evidence to fuel the resistance's propaganda war. Again, it's a promising premise – a game hero who isn't super-powered,



The parallels between *Beyond Good & Evil* and *King Kong* are clear in the combat: in both games Michel Ancel strives to preserve the humanity of his characters even when they are battling enormous and fantastical foes


Your first actions in the game are to protect Jade's idyllic lighthouse home, and this sense of ownership and security gained lasts throughout the game's story



just super-determined. But this too is undermined as the game progresses, with allusions to Jade's mysterious hidden identity and preordained fate. She even has a special power-up attack. How much more impact would the game's story have had if it had really been her quick wit and itchy shutter finger that saved the day?

Worse, the cracks that show in the game's narrative widen when it comes to the gameplay. *BG&E* offers the standard adventure game mishmash of exploration, stealth, combat, platforming, collect 'em ups and minigames, except its heart doesn't seem to be in any of them. Ancel, determined not to let his game become bloated, or to emphasise elements which undermined the story he'd created, in the end only hollowed out much of the interaction. Combat is deliberately hobbled, platforming is automatic and joyless, exploration confined to ensure linear progress, collecting turned to a chore by instructing you on the location of every item, puzzles are rudimentary in their simplicity, stealth simplified to repetitive basics, and the minigames diversions at best. Although everything works together smoothly, and there's no question that Ancel achieved his ambition of producing a streamlined adventure, there's nothing memorable, nothing meaty in any of the game's set pieces. It's a game you finish in a happy haze, entranced by your time in Jade's world, but hard pressed to remember a single fight, puzzle, race, or stealth challenge that stood out.

And it's this, more than anything, that is Ancel's secret. Jackson, speaking on a 'Making Of' documentary included with the King Kong game, makes a very clear distinction: he didn't choose Ancel because of his story-writing abilities. He chose him because of how good a storyteller he was. And that skill is abundantly apparent in Jade's Hillysian home. The first thing that strikes you is the total confidence and cohesion of his vision. Hillys should be a mess of contradictions. It's a world which welds the mundanely modern together with elements of sci-fi and traditional fantasy without the slightest attempt at explanation or rationale: Jade may communicate by email and pay by credit card, but her friends are talking walruses and she flies around in a spaceship. These vibrant ideas find a perfect expression in an art style which is as grounded in the traditions of European architecture and bande-dessiné as it is liberated by the freedom of game technology. The canals and coffee shops of the main city are drawn with familiar affection, the sharks, pigs and people that frequent them represented with simplicity and charm. At a time when many designers are chasing hyper-realism, and others are labouring over perfectly consistent visions of alternate universes, the *BG&E* team had the nerve to present Hillys as pure invention, confident that the warmth and solidity of their absurd world would enable players to take it at face value.

Jade may communicate by email and pay by credit card, but her friends are talking walruses and she flies around in a spaceship

Other games, however, have produced charming worlds which haven't succeeding in wooing players (and movie moguls) as effectively as Ancel's. Where *Beyond Good & Evil* differed was in the simple tricks it used to integrate you into that world. For a medium whose claim to fame is that it's interactive, games are all too often unable to allow their players to have a lasting impact on the worlds they explore. With new technology and bigger teams, next-gen games may be the first to move towards the creation of rich, graphical worlds where the player's actions have persistent and varied effects, but most gamers long since stopped holding their breath. It's an enormous and unforgiving undertaking that games may never perfect. But what Ancel shows is that with the slightest of touches, games can use their own limitations to reinforce the sense that



Combat is painfully simple but slickly implemented, seeing Jade cartwheel from enemy to enemy with flexible precision. However, its inclusion – alongside her super-attack move – can't help but undermine her characterisation as a believably frail human being



BEYOND GOOD AND SEQUEL

Beyond Good & Evil had a notoriously troubled development, triggered by an unsuccessful showing at E3 2002 which, combined with Ubisoft's concern over the commercial failure of similarly artistically ambitious games like *Ico*, lead to *BG&E* being substantially retooled. Jade was toughened up from a wide-eyed teenage girl to someone with the military-esque clothing and sterner demeanour to match her war-reporter job. The game was also shortened and tightened, with Ancel dismayed by *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*'s long, empty periods of exploration and repetitive mini-animations. Little is known about what else changed over the 18 months before the game's release, but Ancel is frank about how demoralised the team became when asked to rework a game they believed was close to completion. "We never made *Beyond Good & Evil*" he explained in E131. "This is *Beyond Good & Evil 2*" While many fans would love to see the game's original form, many more hanker after a real sequel. It's not clear how likely this is: *King Kong* will no doubt boost Ancel's profile, and although *BG&E* was widely considered a failure, it was never intended to be a huge seller – Ancel suggested the budget had been set in an anticipation of 1-2m sales. But Ubisoft's increasing reliance on familiar names and fast-turnaround sequels makes it seem an unlikely project for it to endorse.







The final space-based sections run the risk of being this game's 'Xen' but are solid and spectacular

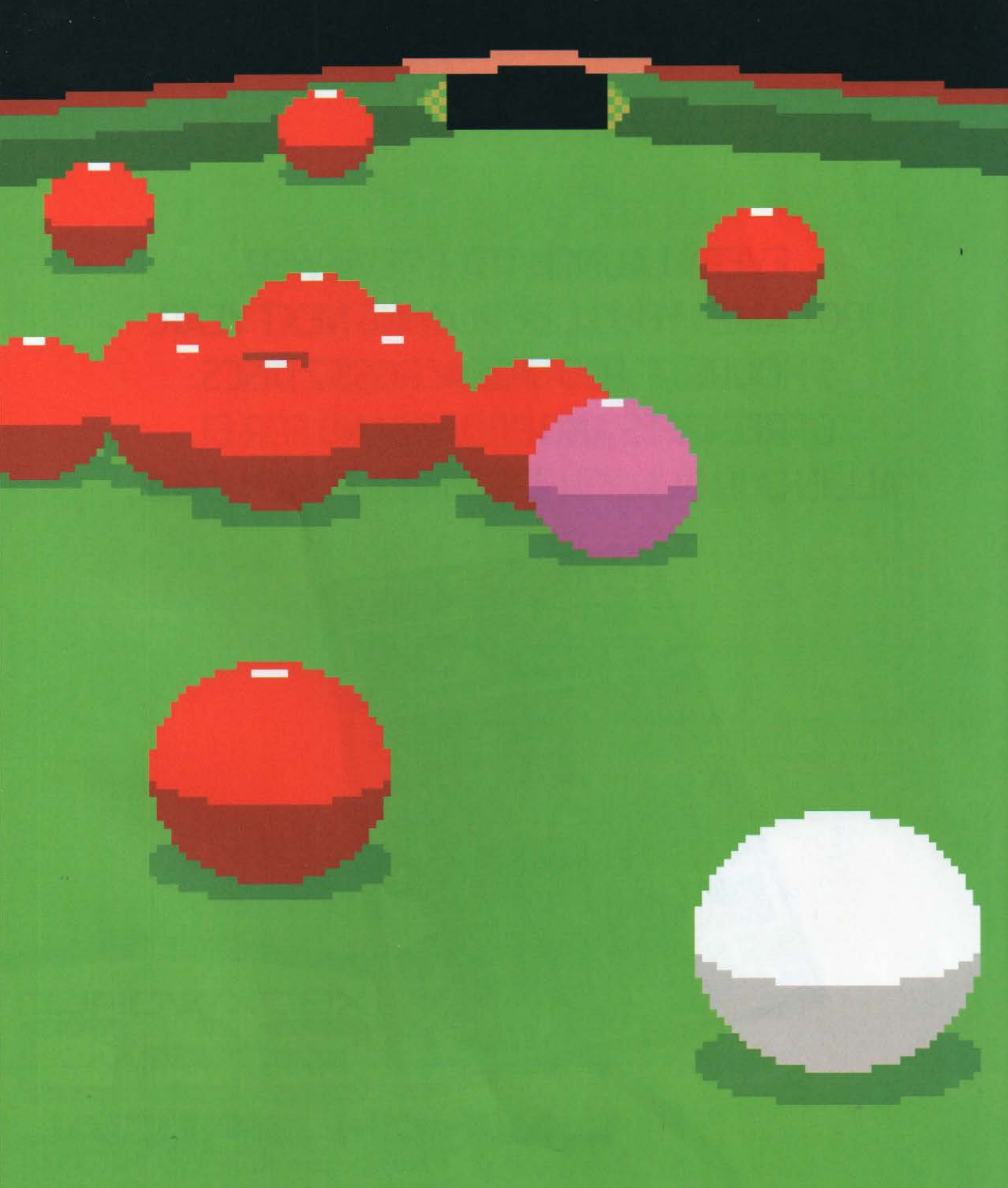
their worlds are alive and changeable. *Beyond Good & Evil's* main minigame is hovercraft racing, and the tracks snake around the main playable areas. Midway through Jade's investigations, she discovers that to access one highly protected installation she'll need to sneak through a shortcut only accessible from the middle of one of the race tracks. It's a simple ruse, but an effective one: your experienced gamer brain has already marked those areas off as furniture – locations which can be seen but not interacted with. Lining up on the starting grid with seven other eager NPC racers, knowing your purpose is so much more devious and substantial, does a surprisingly sophisticated job of conveying why her bundle of polygons is so much more valuable than theirs. It makes her autonomy – which is the other side of the coin of your control over the game – unusually visible.



The game's day/night cycle has little discernible impact on the gameworld, but it adds enormously to the atmosphere of the city's watery boulevards

There are similar touches throughout. As Jade's photographs filter out to the populace via the resistance's underground newspaper, discontent grows and protesters gather in the main square. Jade – although they don't know her real identity – has become a hero to them, and they chant her name and parade her slogans as she stands right in front of them, confronted by evidence of the impact of her earlier actions. It's exhilarating and a tiny bit eerie, despite the fact that it's the simplest bit of gaming sleight of hand, only a few generations down from 16bit RPGs playing tricks with the names you type in for your characters. At the game's climax, after Jade has taken control of the army's (mysteriously unguarded) orbiting antenna, the resistance broadcasts her photographs to the whole world, filling the huge screens that loom over the city streets and replacing the army's propaganda with its own. And so, in place of the 'news' programmes that you've been watching since the beginning of the game, you're now seeing the photos that you've taken throughout, compete with out-of-focus fuzz and heads-chopped-off and whatever other incompetences you displayed while guiding Jade through her adventures. Again, it's a simple trick, but it elevates the images you've created to the same status as the rest of the game's preprepared content, and it makes your presence in the world feel meaningful.

It's this which makes Ancel such a good storyteller, and it's this that Jackson likely found persuasive when looking for a game-maker who could extend his own tale. Ancel may not be a master of story-writing, he may not map out the most sophisticated character arcs, and he may not have the instincts to set taut and rewarding game mechanics at the heart of the experience he creates, but he has an ability to create characters with instant resonance – and, if you doubt that, you only need to hear 'Carlson and Peters!' echo in your memory to convince you. In a videogame world – where those characters will be acting under their creator's control for so much less time than in other media – this is unusually vital. And, once established, he can place those characters – and therefore the player – in a world that feels real and responsive to their actions – regardless of how limited those actions actually are. However, the proof of Jackson's choice of pudding is in the playing: *King Kong* is finished now, and you can read our review on p101. Whatever that game's achievements, however, his determination to work with someone who treasures the emotional connection between player and character above all else means Ancel's unique skill shines out as clearly from *Kong* as it does from this. And, as a consequence, for all the historical footnotes their relationship may produce, the game's real impact will remain in the minds of those who remember their time at Jade's side with pride, satisfaction and, perhaps, just the tiniest touch of boyish infatuation.







THE MAKING OF...
JIMMY WHITE'S WHIRLWIND SNOOKER

Cutting-edge physics programming and a little celebrity pizazz: what happened when Archer met Jimmy and snooker went 3D...

ORIGINAL FORMATS: **AMIGA, ST** PUBLISHER: **VIRGIN** DEVELOPER: **ARCHER MACLEAN** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1991**

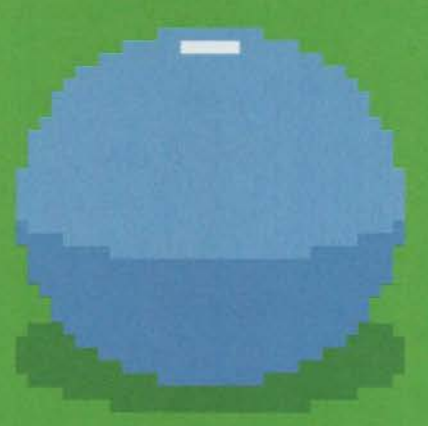
It came to him in a dream. Suspended by a rope, dangling from the light canopy above a snooker table in a dark hall, he floated above the baize, watching the balls roll, ricochet and disappear into pockets. **Archer Maclean** awoke, determined to create a 3D version of the game, complete with these dramatic fly-by views. However, this was 1981 – and though snooker's popularity was huge, the memory of the Atari 800 was not.

"Steve Davis and Jimmy White were household names back then," recalls Maclean. "I started to work out the maths involved with a diagonal shot across the table and how accurate these guys would have to be. I studied it intensely, trying to work out how an 8bit maths processor could do fixed point 32- and 64bit calculations quickly enough, but I had to finally admit that the 6502 processor running at 1.7MHz was just not going to be able to make it run at a decent framerate. A screen update every half an hour doesn't make a good game."

Skip to 1988 and Maclean, whilst experimenting with video sampling software on his Atari ST, happened to flick from Wogan to the snooker on BBC2. The screen showed a close-up of the pink and black by a corner pocket and the image fired a thousand synapses.

"That dream! I started to wonder whether the ST, with its 68000 processor and built-in maths commands, could handle it. I sat down for 14 hours, first working out a routine that could fill a ball extremely quickly. I was like a crazed animal, paper flying everywhere... people think it's just snooker, AI and a 3D model, but there's more to it. It's deep."

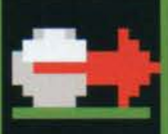
Suspended by a rope, dangling from the light canopy above a snooker table, he floated above the baize, watching the balls roll

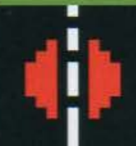


Almost two decades on from Maclean's eureka moment and with snooker games one of the most established and conservative of genres, it's easy to forget the challenges faced in producing the first 3D version of the game. How to give the balls convincing











NO FLIES ON US

Maclean was acutely aware that the nature of snooker meant that while players were mulling over their next shot, the screen was disappointingly static. "I wanted to give my game some life," he explains. "I'd often be coding through the night and in the summer, tiny thunderbugs would congregate behind the anti-glare cover on my computer. The bloody things would crawl up the screen and obscure the character you were trying to read and when you tried to squish them, of course you couldn't because they were behind the glass. So I emulated flies, which would zip around if you didn't press anything for a while.

"Unfortunately, this was just when the concept of computer viruses was becoming mainstream and there was all this hysteria about your computer getting infected. The Virgin Helpline received hundreds of calls from worried users who were convinced the flies were a symptom of a diseased Amiga."

Maclean's love of hidden oddities also stretched to the balls pulling faces at you if undisturbed for long enough, while the trickshot editor contained a cheat to trigger a perfect 147 clearance.



shadow? How to plot ball movement while allowing a free-roaming camera? And, perhaps most crucially, how to calculate the physics involved in the countless collisions triggered when the cueball strikes a pack of reds without the game grinding to a virtual standstill?

Maclean's solutions were an unconventional mix of maths and mirrors. He devised an ingenious way of changing the colours in the ST's video memory using a single bit rather than the usual four, which allowed a swift change from, say, light to dark red and made possible an effective elliptical shading technique. The freedom given to the in-game camera meant the draw order of polygons needed to not only be fast, but be smart enough to recognise that while the centre of an elongated polygon representing one of the cushions might seem to be behind a ball, to draw it so would result in the ball floating magically outside the table's perimeter. Maclean thus had to construct a polygon sorter that had specific draw orders for particular regions of the table, determinedly searching for a universal solution to any camera view.

"Probably the biggest challenge was working out the AI, though," explains Maclean. "What shot should the computer take next? I created a ranking system that would numerically assess what was on the table and work out where everything was in relation to the cueball. It would then work out the angles required to pot each ball and eliminate anything over a set angle according to who you were playing – Jimmy White could still do a cut shot at a 75 degree angle, but Tom, the easiest opponent, wouldn't try anything over 35 degrees. Then it calculated angle from the cueball to its target and target to pocket, ratio of distance of cueball to target and target to pocket, whether each ball could follow a particular pathway without striking another ball... Oh, the maths got fun."

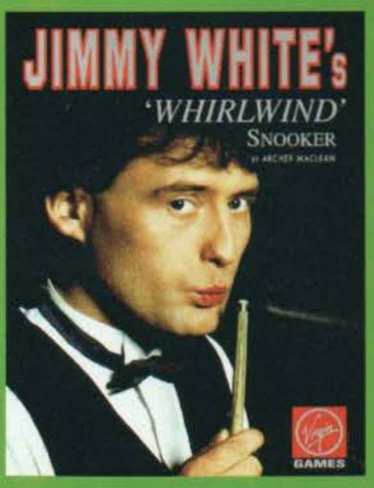
The arduous task was further compounded when it came to the computer being snookered. Maclean spent hour upon hour considering the fastest way to calculate the ideal rebound shot, until inspiration came from an unexpected source: "I was playing *Robotron* and the tanks in that game always get you by bouncing their shots off a wall first. Of course, it was blindingly obvious in the end – mirror your position on an imaginary screen above or below the actual screen and aim for that, which gives the perfect angle to hit you, whether off a wall or, in my case, a cushion.'

With this breakthrough, Maclean took the process several steps further, until the computer could perform the superhuman feat of pocketing a ball off four cushions. In tandem with this, he had also written a routine that would play 15 shots 'internally' with varying amounts of power and spin and then assess the resulting cueball position before deciding on the best shot to take. This was a game that could clear the table before the player even got a look in, and so the problem was ironically turned on its head – how to include artificial stupidity.

"I'd made the computer so good at snooker I had to start watering it down. I limited the number of 'internal' shots an opponent would take and then after all the hidden maths and ridiculously complicated calculations, I'd do a final bit that added a random value to the shot angle, to represent human error."

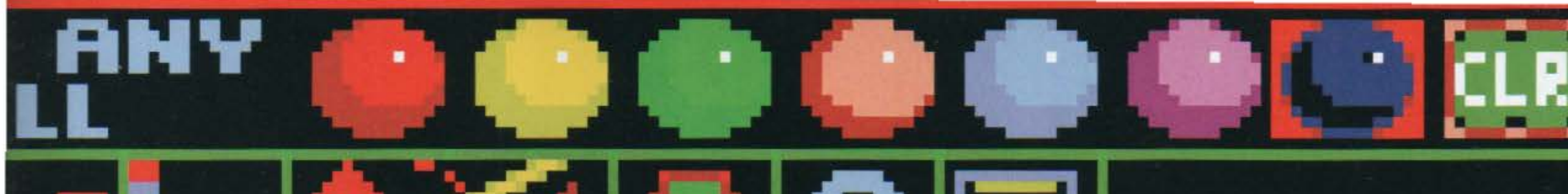
'Hidden maths' is a key phrase. In the few seconds of calm as the onscreen cue feathered back and forth in preparation to take a shot, the physics engine ran in overdrive filling up a table containing all of the ball positions over the next ten seconds. Once the maths was completed, the cueball would be struck and the game could plot all

Maclean developed the AI until the computer opponent could perform the superhuman feat of pocketing a ball off four cushions

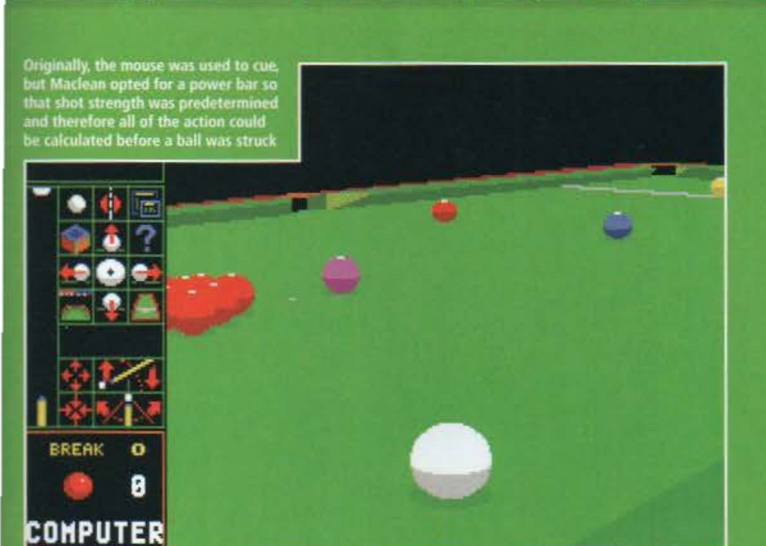




White (pictured below with Maclean) was heavily involved in marketing the game, something that involved posing for lots of photos and also meeting suitably reverential game journos



Originally, the mouse was used to cue, but Maclean opted for a power bar so that shot strength was predetermined and therefore all of the action could be calculated before a ball was struck





ball movements at a constant rate, realising Maclean's dream of a fast and accurate 3D simulation.

The game, originally entitled *147* to highlight the superlative AI, was initially to be published by Activision with an endorsement from Stephen Hendry, whose robotic style of snooker seemed to make him a logical choice, but the deal was never finalised. Virgin picked up the game in early 1991 and was demonstrating the title prior to launch at a London trade show that summer when events took a slightly surreal course.

"Who should emerge from the crowd but Jeremy Beadle," recalls Maclean. "He said: 'That's mad, that is – it plays just like Jimmy White!' He then pulls out this brick of a mobile phone and calls Jimmy's agent at the time, Barry Hearn. Two days later, we're meeting this iconic sports agent, who reminded me of JR but without the hat, explaining we want to call it *Jimmy White's Whirlwind Snooker*. He said they already had a snooker game and pointed to the Spectrum he had, which was playing *Steve Davis Snooker*. So we set up an Amiga – I'd even knocked up a title screen with a whirlwind behind Jimmy's name – and he said: 'Wow, 3D. This will do good!'"

A licence was agreed upon (Maclean won't reveal the figure paid, but acknowledges it was "significantly lower than today's standards") and Jimmy White's celebrity status and considerable involvement in the game's promotion meant something of a media frenzy ensued. The game was featured on World Of Sport, numerous snooker programmes and Saturday morning kids' show, Motormouth. A Channel 4 news programme filmed at Richard Branson's house saw the Virgin supremo playing the game alongside White, and involved an impromptu cameo by Maclean, who had to hide beneath the computer desk and operate the mouse periscope fashion, due to both men's embarrassingly lacklustre performances. Then, rather unfairly, Maclean found himself on Kilroy being accused by the orange-tinted demagogue of peddling addictive games to children like a drug dealer.

Cashing in on White's popularity undeniably contributed to the title's healthy sales figures, but Maclean is quick to point out that the game was already complete and had been heralded in the gaming press prior to the star's involvement: "We had a slick 3D game, really visually impressive, but it was Jimmy's name that allowed us to get what was still considered a geeky thing into the mainstream media and on national television. All free publicity, too."

Commercial success was accompanied by critical acclaim. Awards included ECTS Game of the Show and Sports Game of the Year, and in 1992 Maclean himself was named as European Programmer of the Year. All these trinkets naturally pale when we remind Maclean of his triumph on TV show GamesMaster, where he secured the coveted Golden Joystick by beating a small child on his own game.

Maclean grimaces as he explains the circumstances: "Virgin had organised a national competition through its Megastores to find the champion on *Jimmy White's*, who would then play me on TV. The producer told me to let the kid win, but make it look close. There were no rehearsals though, and I accidentally won by a single ball. I thought: 'Christ, this doesn't look good'. The lad had brought his entire family down to the studio and he looked absolutely gutted. I received this bloody joystick in its perspex case and immediately turned and gave it to the poor kid, saying he deserved it. But that bit never got shown. I've had some right stick for that over the years."

Indeed, despite the plaudits, the success of the game brought its own frustrations, not least Maclean's intense dislike of being pigeonholed. "I've done a lot of snooker-based games, but I've also done games like *Dropzone*, *IK+* and now *Mercury*, but still – I was at an awards ceremony a few years back and was sat next to the head of a large UK publisher. He said in this plummy accent: 'Ah, Mr Snooker… aren't you Jimmy White's brother?' Christ."



Though there were certain visual limitations (the curve of the 'D', for example, was rendered in an angular fashion), *Snooker* was a hugely convincing sim. It has, of course, been refined further since



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Real Time Worlds

DATE FOUNDED: 2002

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 98

HEAD OF STUDIO: Dave Jones (below)



URL: www.realtimeworlds.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
N/A

KEY STAFF:
Dave Jones (managing director), Tony Harman (commercial director), Ian Hetherington (chairman)





Vehicle assets from *APB* (above) and an in-game image from Xbox 360 title *Crackdown* (below)





LOCATION:
Dundee

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Crackdown (Xbox 360, Microsoft), *APB* (PC, Webzen)

PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNOLOGY

"At RTW, we pride ourselves in our ability to find and retain excellent people. This is possible thanks to the stability afforded by a team of directors that includes a previous MD of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, a former director of Nintendo Of America, and the creator of epic franchises such as *Lemmings* and *Grand Theft Auto*.

"We maintain a design-driven approach to our games, and through this we're set to deliver yet more incredibly successful titles that buck the trend of derivative and licence-driven titles. We have invested heavily in cutting-edge content-creation tools – radically reducing the pain of the ever-burgeoning content creation process, while allowing our art and audio teams to focus on what really demands their skills. We have also chosen to invest in the right technologies, such as Unreal Engine 3, all the while adopting best-practice development processes to ensure we have the best work-life balance possible.

"On top of all that we're delighted with the alliances we've forged with our current partners (Microsoft and Korean MMOG publisher Webzen). They wholeheartedly share our vision for the games we're crafting and, of course, have the financial clout to ensure they're properly supported."

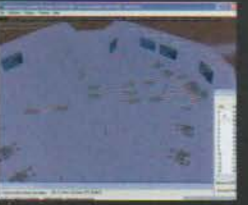


Brave new worlds

Offering its AliceServer, which is based on a naturalistic approach to game development, the latest entrant into the MMOG technology battle is UK-based pioneer Nice Tech



Crucial to the successful launch of any MMOG is stopping people hacking or exploiting bugs in the game. AliceServer tracks suspicious patterns within incoming traffic in order to pin down any cheats



An abstracted view of how a game might look from the server's point of view, one of AliceServer's innovative features is the way it handles in-game objects which are modelled procedurally

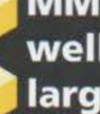
www.nicetech.co.uk

As titles like *World Of WarCraft* demonstrate, online games are hot property. Both in terms of pulling in new audiences from emerging markets such as China as well as generating piles of cash, there's a synergy between the excitement of the games themselves and the excitement of the business models based around their subscription payment methods.

The problem is that behind such headlines of success lie many more battered dreams, failed visions and bankrupt business plans. For while popular massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) can generate profit margins well over 50 per cent, there are large setup costs involved both to develop such games and build the global server infrastructure required to launch them. Even when that part of the process is over, developers have to constantly update and improve games to prevent their audience decamping to the next, newer, greater launch.

So prevalent is the problem, it appears to be exactly the sort of thing someone could solve with a clever piece of middleware. One nice idea and tens of millions of dollars of venture capital money later, prospective knights in shining armour such as Zona, Rebelarts and Butterfly.net are no more. Their attempts to create innovative solutions using grid-based server architectures and open plug-and-play frameworks somehow didn't solve developers' problems.

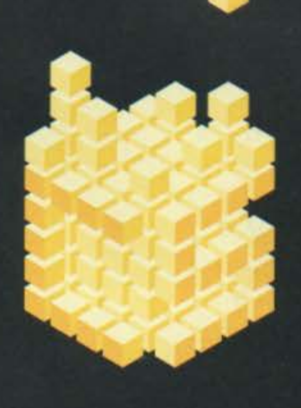
This doesn't mean the challenge of overcoming the MMOG middleware quandary is over. Huge concerns such as IBM and Sun continue to offer their expertise, while down in Cambridge, another, if smaller, competitor has emerged. Although as **Ben Simpson**, chief operating officer of Nice Tech, is at pains to point out, the company is not positioning itself as a typical middleware provider. "Initially, we're looking to work with publishers and developers in a cooperative way," he carefully explains. "Our preferred approach is to bring our AliceServer technology and significant design and development experience together to offer a complete service."

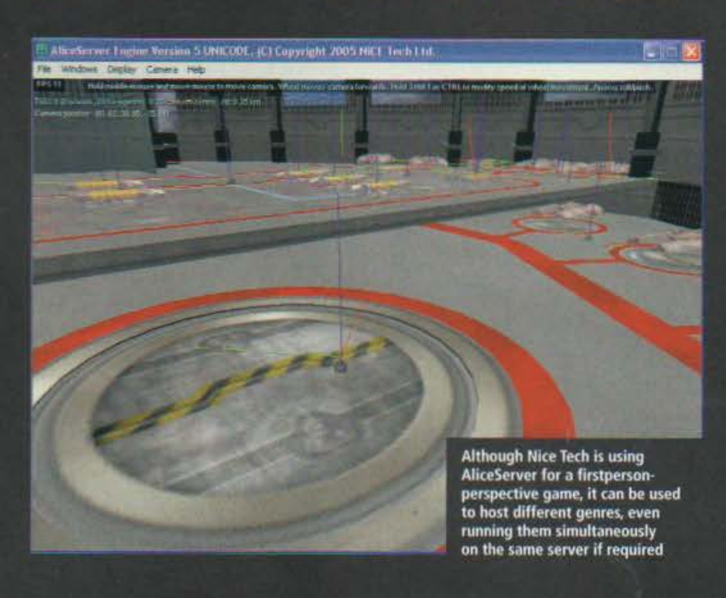


MMOGs can generate profit margins well over 50 per cent, but there are large development and setup costs

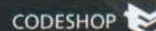
Based on what Simpson calls 'bottom-up design philosophy using the principles of nature', one of AliceServer's unique selling points is the use of autonomous agents to create realistic worlds in which the behaviour of objects and creatures is generated procedurally.

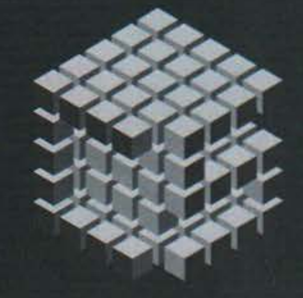
"The agents or objects in our worlds are described by their physical attributes and actual structure," he says, pointing out that while most games emulate the





Although Nice Tech is using AliceServer for a firstperson-perspective game, it can be used to host different genres, even running them simultaneously on the same server if required









As well as working on the AliceServer technology, Nice Tech has also had plenty of experience developing and running MMOGs of its own. Its first foray into the market was the space-based realtime strategy game *Time Of Defiance*



real world, this procedural approach means AliceServer objects act in an inherent way rather than because they are following prescribed rules. "Emulation only attempts to appear like something, whereas we attempt to model the object itself," he emphasises.

The result, he claims, is that AliceServer will deliver games which are more consistent for players. Other potential advantages include the ability for rendering engines to progressively improve their ability to display the world in higher resolutions as new PC hardware is released without the need for the developer to recreate assets. "And, as computing power increases, features such as physics systems or new input methods can be added without the need for massive reprogramming exercises," Simpson points out.

And it's because the design process using such an agent-based method is different to traditional development that the company is encouraging interested parties to take a more cooperative approach.

Another benefit is the way AliceServer itself acts as a prototyping and development environment for teams to experiment. "We can produce assets using a simple proprietary scripting language," Simpson reveals. "On one level, this means small teams can produce and immediately test a new game asset in a live environment and even if the asset is faulty it will not crash the server. It simply won't work as planned." This means game designers can develop assets and test creative ideas for gameplay much quicker than if they had to work with programmers.

The team at Nice Tech has even invented a new job title, called the 'agent engineer', to encapsulate this way of working. "We envisage producers, game and level designers will occupy such positions as well as perhaps people who want to move away from hardcore development and have more creative aspirations," Simpson jokes.

Other aspects of AliceServer's operation are more conventional, however. It's designed to handle tens of thousands of simultaneous connections and hundreds of thousands of interactive objects per server. Scaleability, another MMOG bugbear, is promised, with Simpson saying that doubling the capacity from, say, 50,000 interactive objects to 100,000 would simply require a doubling of effective processing power. This is something that's particularly important for online games which can suffer from expensive problems if, say, a doubling of users results in a quadrupling of required server power.

AliceServer can also host different games and different genres simultaneously. "Of course, there are different technical challenges in delivering a firstperson game and a thirdperson multi-theatre strategy game," Simpson says. "But the majority of the core systems are reused, so AliceServer remains compatible."

Still, it remains early days for the team, which as well as continuing to develop AliceServer is working on a game which uses it. Entitled *Dawn Republic*, the firstperson MMOG isn't due for release until 2007. Hopefully by then Nice Tech will have also discovered if it has succeeded in the bigger game of online middleware.

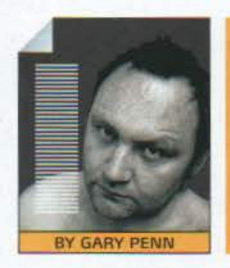
Bringing AI online

With careers encompassing stints at acclaimed artificial intelligence pioneer Creature Labs, COO Ben Simpson and his brother Toby, who's the company's chief technology officer, have plenty of experience of cutting-edge AI. It isn't a surprise therefore that AliceServer's model of using principles of nature also draws on theories of artificial life.

"At the moment, videogames typically use rule-based systems which rarely exhibit anything we would class as intelligence," says Simpson. "In the future, however, someone is going to have to serve the drinks and guard the castle gates. You can be sure that no human player is going to want to perform those jobs but they are ideal jobs for artificial people."

And that's the plan for the Nice Tech team. "Our biological agents are designed to gradually replace an agent's scripts with biological structures that provide a smorgasbord of potential interactions," says Simpson. "Ultimately, our goal is an in-game artificial person that's indistinguishable from a real human being."

Currently, Nice Tech is experimenting with simpler software organisms, which are based on theories taken from biochemistry, genetics and neural networks. "So far, we've grown forests from scattered seeds and modelled an animal with a simple biochemistry that displayed basic drives such as hunger and fear," Simpson says. Building up this research to create an in-game virtual person will involve plenty of hard work and several technical breakthroughs to complete, however.



MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Being there

The future of play is with everyone playing the same games at the same time, remotely but together as one world. One love. Well, that's one part of one proposed future, anyway. Ultimately, like it or not, there will always be someone just around the corner to play against or with, to converse, compare or consult with, to borrow or trade new toys, new portions of play, new rules even. You at least know you both have a mutual interest in something: the game in question.

Microsoft is best embracing the emerging global gaming community out of the big three console manufacturers. Its successful Live service is extrapolated to a stricter 'Always Live Enabled' mindset with the arrival of 360.

Sony still has a weak grip on 'out-of-the-box connectivity' whereas Nintendo, not surprisingly, does its own thing and continues to veer away from remote play, focusing connectivity on convenience of play instead: delivering the goods rather than facilitating their use with multiple real players.

Connectivity is having a marked effect on the world. Since the dawn of the internet my once-remarkable encyclopaedic memory has shrivelled to a pathetic stump because I now know that whatever I want to know is usually only a Google away. It's the new Alzheimer's.

It's inevitable everything will always be connected everywhere. But not that everyone will want to take advantage of that through play. Not all the time with everything, anyway. Playing the likes of *Guru Logic Champ* and getting stuck with a puzzle, to instantly find help from around the world, to have someone show me a possible solution as if they are standing next to me... That's sweet.

But the likes of *Tetris* I'm playing like I'm chewing gum or reading, to pass the time, for my own amusement. I don't want or need others involved as spectators or participants. Mind you, these days I seldom want to play against enemies or strict rivals anyway. I want 'good sports', players whose aims are to make my play time as entertaining as possible and not leave me feeling hollow and bitter. Sadly, that's only really viable with artificial players.

The nonplayer toys can be considered thoughtless automatons. Or they can be thought of as in the hands of players, artificial ones with human traits using individual control systems and other such limitations – qualities we try to imbue through so-called 'artificial intelligence'. The illusion of human error – fumbling the ball, taking the corner too fast, missing the shot, preferably in the most dramatic way possible and with impeccable timing: when it matters most, like in the movies. Artificial players don't have to play to win – only to ensure you have the most satisfying time. Unlike real players, artificial players are happy to do all the dull and dirty work, to do as they are told when it's required and to play in roles no one else wants to perform. With artificial players, there's more scope for drama. (They are even starting to control the virtual cameras.)

"Artificial players are happy to do all the dull and dirty work, to do as they are told when it's required and to play in roles no one else wants"

The fact is it's usually more fun dishing it out than taking it, no matter how balanced play is. You can confuse and abuse artificial players in ways that would drive real players insane. Who wants to be on the receiving end of imbalance or persecution or to be playing a minor part? When you play, you are The Star. Anyone fancy playing Zombie #453 in the massively multiplayer *Resident Evil*?

Real players are only real fun when a) you know them, b) you are in the same real space and c) they don't play overly safe. Playing remotely with strangers can be soulless, especially if there's little scope for chat and if they want to win – more so if they have skills and are intimate with the rules of engagement. Losing is one thing, having your arse repeatedly kicked is another, but having absolutely no fun along the way is the real killer.

Ten players in the same room playing on the same console on the same screen in the same playscape in, say, Saturn *Bomberman* I find far more involving and emotionally stimulating than the latest FPS shooter over LAN – let alone modem (broadband or otherwise) – not just because the mix of people is usually more varied (certainly less testosterone-driven) but because sociability is tangible – there's an obvious physical presence. It's more convenient and dramatic to deride in person than through a limited 'instant messenger' system or microphone. The reactions can't be any more 'live'. Remote players on the other hand need not be who they say they are – not even real let alone connected (not that it matters who's on the other end if play is no less enjoyable).

Ultimately, this reflects my shifting play habits: from substantial orgiastic feasting to occasional light snacking – more about play in the purest sense of unserious fun rather than taking on formal challenges – the taking part rather than playing to win. And every day, I'm glad to say, I find I'm far from alone in wanting to play that way.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki




BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Trailing the virtual mafia

"Behind every fortune, there is a crime." This old Sicilian saying refers to the basic balance in the universe – a great wealth, which upsets the balance, must take a great act of violence to accrue. The phrase, used as a preface to Mario Puzo's The Godfather, was ironically coined as an argument *for* the mafia: a warning against the ruling principalities in feudal Italy. Under the restrictive and capricious martial law of ruling powers, which changed with the seasons, Italians grew to distrust those who ruled over them. Rather than turn to the latest despot who wouldn't know the first thing about their plight, the Italian people chose to mete out their own kind of justice. Out of this arose the 20th century mafia (the cosa nostra – 'this thing of ours'). The mafia taught the world that sometimes, when the powers that be don't have your best interests at heart, strength and security have to be forged by the people.

> You can hire them to assault a sim. For various rates they can blackmail, bribe, or collect debts from your virtual enemies

It's a lesson that applies just as equally through the electronic looking glass, in our virtual worlds. The corporations behind massive virtual worlds are notoriously fickle and authoritarian – in a way that, were they real-world governments, they would be condemned by Amnesty. There's generally not even a police force, only local government – with GMs instead of MPs – and about as effective as real-world local government. A GM appeal might result in something helpful being done, or it might result in nothing at all. Even EA admits it: spokesman **Jeff Brown** says, about its virtual world *The Sims Online*: "The rules are enforced about as well as the rules are enforced on the Massachusetts Turnpike." I've driven that turnpike, and take it from me, it seemed very much like the feudal anarchy that gave birth to the mafia. No surprise, then, that virtual vigilante groups have arisen in virtual worlds, modelled on real-world crime families.

To cater for those players in need, overlooked by the system, 28-year old *Sims Online* player JC Soprano, aka Marsellus Wallace – real name **Jeremy Chase** – started The Sims Mafia. They offered a service, for a price, catering to those Sims who had problems EA wouldn't help with. Their service was so popular they have since branched into other virtual worlds, including, recently, *Second Life*.

On their website, heavy on media-influenced mafia messages, you can hire them to take action in all the ways you'd expect from a bona-fide crime family. For 100,000 Simoleans (*The Sims'* currency) you can hire them to assault a sim. Because physical violence in virtual worlds is mostly harmless, the assault includes a barrage of instant messages, and bad ratings which can affect everything from a character's virtual reputation to their virtual credit. For various rates, they can blackmail, bribe, or collect debts from your virtual enemies. They used to hire virtual escorts, but the service is now 'closed due to simstually transmitted diseases'. (In reality, Chase – who ran a porn site in his spare time – closed down the prostitution rackets because there was too great a risk of underage players hiring virtual hookers.) They offer the traditional loans (at 25 per cent interest), mediation (a 'sit-down') to settle beefs and even, for 250,000 Simoleans, the big hit (it could be your virtual best friend who takes you out). They don't declare how they take a virtual character out, but stories abound of people hounded so consistently that they eventually delete their account. As well as the paid services, which account for about 35 per cent of their revenue, The Sims Mafia also run sports spread-betting and backdoor card games in virtual VIP casinos, with 100,000 Simoleans (about $4) minimum bet. (Although the dice game they play, 'paper, scissors, stone', slightly undermines their high-rolling image).

Virtual war occasionally breaks out with the other online mafia crime families, until both sides incur enough losses that they're forced to sit down and make the peace. In the real world, of course, all these things would be illegal. But in our virtual worlds, there's no such thing as prison – and banishment means little when you can simply sneak back in under another name. The virtual crime family is another example of the ways that virtual worlds have yet to be fully legislated within. (In fact, JC Soprano has hired virtual representation, in case he is hauled up in front of the Second Life Superior Court.)

In our virtual worlds, where physical pain is impossible and morality therefore has a less concrete basis, we are rediscovering the shape of ourselves – both in virtual courts and in virtual criminals. When you consider the conscious and the unconscious, Jung wrote, everything is symmetrical. In his systemic view, criminals are just as necessary as the law. "Essentially I look at myself, in a way, as like Gotti," Chase said in a rare interview with the Second Life Herald. "He fought the law, like I do with EA and other groups. And he was very respected... he gave to the community. Sure, [Gotti] was violent and ruthless. I am not saying these guys are saints. But they do some good in the community. With the bad, there is always some good."

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



Illustration: tstokes



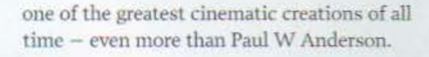
When writing this column for **Edge** there are often things I want to get off my manly chest which don't warrant an entire article. Niggles and irritations that would need to be stretched unnaturally to cover the required 900 words. Adhering to the ethos that nothing is ever wasted, here are my leftovers – things I'd like to throw into the Gaming Room 101:

Being the Alien in Aliens Vs Predator games

Are any of the Alien films told from the Aliens' point of view? Do you sympathise with the Aliens in their struggle against the evil human tyrants? No, you do not. Can we please, for the love of Jiminy Cricket, have an Alien game – or an Aliens Vs Predator game – where you don't have to play from a supposedly invincible bad guy's point of view? It reduces tension and focus. It reduces the atmosphere. It devalues one of the greatest cinematic creations of all time – even more than Paul W Anderson.

Cutscenes you can't skip

I'm not a fan of cutscenes as it is (and I speak as someone who has written them), but if you are a frustrated screenwriter, and have a hackneyed story featuring underdeveloped characters, that you feel the world needs to hear, at least give us the opportunity to skip it. I reserve special scorn for *Far Cry Instincts*, and the several-minutes-long, unskippable demo which you have to sit through EVERY SINGLE TIME YOU START THE GAME. Unless there's something wrong with my copy, this is the single worst game design decision ever made. Ever. A suitable punishment for the individual responsible would be forcing them to watch a four-minute breakdance routine whenever they wanted to enter their home.



As ex-Wurzel Gummidge Jon Pertwee once remarked: "There's nothing as scary as coming home and finding a yeti on your toilet"

Alien worlds as the climactic level in otherwise urban firstperson shooters

As ex-Wurzel Gummidge Jon Pertwee once remarked: "There's nothing as scary as coming home and finding a yeti on your toilet in Tooting Bec." In other words, it's scarier if you juxtapose the familiar with the unfamiliar, because it gives the viewer – or the player – a point of reference.

Star Wars works because its alien worlds are usually a mix of real-world architecture and real-world geography. Far too many alien environments in games appear to have taken their inspiration from prog rock album covers. This is why I enjoyed *Halo*, but found vast swathes of *Halo 2* to be as dull as Durham, with its near-endless levels set in that ruddy huge, abstract, purple spaceship thing.

3D Sonic The Hedgehog games

They're no fun. Go back to 2D!

The fact nobody ever talks about *Resident Evil* being a rip-off of *Alone In The Dark*

How come *Resident Evil* is always credited with creating the survival horror genre when it stole everything wholesale from *Alone In The Dark*? The interface, the tension, the camera angles, the puzzles, even the mansion setting had all been established by Infogrames' Edwardian scare-fest. Why did the company never take action!?? It baffles and frustrates me slightly more than it should.

Difficult sections in otherwise easy games

Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath was ruined for me by that virtually impossible bit where you have to run out of a building before it explodes (or something). What made it worse was that it came in the middle of an otherwise beautifully pitched game. Because I couldn't be arsed with wasting days of my life repeating the same section I've never finished *Stranger's Wrath*.

Brand loyalty in gamers

Fair enough if you support a football team, but why would anyone in their right mind display loyalty to a corporation like Microsoft or Sony (or Sega or Nintendo or Commodore)? Games is games, and turning a blind eye to the faults of a profit-making business, and dismissing other brands in support of your own, is at best blinkered, and, at worst, cripplingly sad.

Consoles with numbers in their names

Has there ever been a more meaningless name for a console than the Xbox 360? They might as well have called it the Stipend-Fan-Ta-Ham-Besselectom 4.

"But how do we make them realise it's an all-new Xbox, and not the old box in new pants? We need a new angle. Of course – angle! That's it! Xbox 90-degrees! We'll make it so they can stand it on its side, because they like that, the kids. No, wait. Why have only 90 of the degrees when you can have all of them? We're talking Xbox 360-degrees. Xbox 360! I'm a genius."

Except, of course, it probably didn't happen like that, and bloated consultants were doubtless paid millions of pounds to spend months thinking of a suitable trademark.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



inbox



Issue 156

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Portable Gaming & Handhelds: Where do you play yours?

I am curious as to where people actually use their DS/PSP/GBA/other handheld consoles? I see so few people on my commute that actually play their consoles whilst travelling, I'm usually the exception. I do, of course, see loads of people with iPods and MP3 players and phones.
RepititionWillBeValuable

When I do play either the PSP or DS, it's usually in the bathroom. I can't play games in cars, etc, as I get travel sick. Though I have taken the DS to uni a couple of times and played during lectures.
Madlink

Either at home, or on the bus. Only on the bus if it's a doubledecker, because not many people use the top deck and so I don't feel as daft.
qazimod

On the bus? In Glasgow? I'd rather keep my machine, thanks!
Daniel_M

The article 'What Do Comedy Writers Know About Games?' in E156 got me thinking about a subject that has been touched upon many times in **Edge**: games and television. Here we have four established and successful television writers and actors having an engaging, relevant, intelligent and entertaining discussion about games... surely I can't be the only person to see the enormous potential here?

The games market continues to grow considerably and has become entwined with mainstream culture to a degree that many wouldn't have anticipated even five years ago, and yet the only programmes that seem to be produced are completely irrelevant and often insulting, feeling as though they don't even understand the market that they are trying to relate to.

Game advertising on television is a prime example of the market that television producers are either unaware of or choose to ignore – adverts are shown at primetime and appear to have had a considerable budget, despite the admittedly dimwitted and obvious nature that most take. It might seem a stretch to say that people who will sit through a 30-second advert will sit through a 30-minute programme, but it validates the idea that the market is there. After all, game companies wouldn't waste the sums of money required to produce and run an advert on a group that doesn't exist.

The relative lack of game television programmes means that there is no set template and no predefined expectation of what has to be conveyed in the time available, and this seems an ideal field for talented and passionate writers to explore. Surely one of the four individuals involved in your article has the drive and ambition to see just how far their hobby can reach and mature? Their individual CVs and knowledge of games reveal the potential that is there, and I'm sure a television executive or commissioning editor would realise this... or is it simply not time for an intelligent and relevant television programme about games?
Matthew Wright

Four successful TV writers and actors having an engaging, intelligent discussion about games... I can't be the only person to see the potential here?

You're right, of course – there's never been a better time for games on TV. But television land is full of dinosaurs, most of whom remain vacantly unaware of what games are even about nowadays, let alone how popular they are. There are small nuggets of hope – BBC2 Scotland has recently commissioned a humour-led series about games entitled Videogaiden. Unfortunately each show is only ten minutes long and broadcast after midnight, but it's a step in the right direction.

I'd like to point out two more possible game-to-film adaptations for consideration:

Gunhed/Ganheddo (Japan, 1989) is possibly based on the PC Engine game of the same name, although the film may have come first – neither the internet nor my lack of Japanese can answer that one. I haven't seen the film, but as the American dub is attributed to the ubiquitous Alan Smithee – actually Alan McElroy, writer of such 'classics' as Spawn and Halloween 4 – it's not high on my 'to do' list. Various internet sites can't agree on whether the manga by Kia Asamiya came before or after the film either.

Ballistic: Ecks Vs Sever (USA, 2002), co-funded by America and Germany, with a Thai director and stars from China and Mexico, was developed alongside the Game Boy Advance game of the same name with the game inspiring aspects of the film and vice versa. The first *Ecks Vs Sever* game actually came out a year before the film was finished (what took them so long? Certainly not script development) and was apparently developed from a demo to show off the GBA's 3D ability. A more obvious tie-in (not that anyone saw the movie), named fully *Ballistic: Ecks Vs Sever*, and with the stars' likenesses on the packaging, came out after the film. The movie is one of the most thinly plotted films you can imagine – two characters trying to kill each other with bigger and bigger guns – and as such is very faithful to the game! It's at least better than most of the woeful examples in your article, has Lucy Liu and Antonio Banderas in it and some pretty decent stunts.

Hopefully that should be it, but I can't help but wonder if there are some Japanese game-to-film adaptations we've never heard of in the west?
Alex Fitch

The *Ecks Vs Sever* story is certainly a weird one: the second game wasn't actually 'a more obvious tie-in' in many respects because its plot and themes had little to do with the movie.

Anyway, as we said last month, there's a lot more to the world of game influences on celluloid than we were able to pack into the feature, and we'll return to the theme in the future.



David Matthews' letter (Inbox, E156) brought concerns about the videogame industry that have been bubbling away for a while now to the forefront of my mind.

I work in the information management industry so creating policy on how to best preserve corporate identity and make information easily accessible and presentable are very much in the forefront of my day-to-day work. The games industry often seems not to want to be proud of its past or keep its own corporate memory available for everyone to access and enjoy.

So how will we be able to play old games for which hardware and software is increasingly hard, if not impossible, for the average consumer to procure? Overpriced retro compilations are becoming ten-a-penny but, as David points out, you'll only get what the publisher wants you to get – ie, the selected best of their output at that time. You're not likely to see Nintendo rereleasing *Radar Scope* or *Space Fever* on a compilation any time soon, but what if I enjoyed them in the arcades and want to play either of those titles, or the many hundreds of other games no longer available? Emulation is one option but that's illegal; asking for software of that age in Game will be met with confusion, derision or a combination of the two; and collectors' prices are often well out of reach of everyone but the most dedicated gamer. Yet there are very few, if any, other options.

Should there be games libraries that receive a copy of every game upon publication and keep the hardware to play it on that can be rented out for a price in the same way book libraries lend DVDs? The chance of theft of more highly desirable titles is great so that's a no-go. How about museums where you can see the items and choose games to experience on a pay-per-play basis? Not really workable as the institution would likely not survive and



Nat Kent challenges Peter Vine's views, hailing the emotional resonance of *Skies Of Arcadia* while recognising its inherent limitations

the idea probably wouldn't take off. There's also the possibility of consumer rip-off of Nintendo PlayChoice proportions. And what about games not released in your territory? How can you access those considering they're also a part of company and industry history?

A corporate memory is something to be proud of; it shows you where you've come from. Nintendo often shows that it's proud of its past by constantly reinventing its characters and presenting us with new and exciting scenarios. Conversely, I doubt that modern-day Atari would admit to even knowing what an *ET* cartridge is, for the embarrassment it would bring and the desire of the company to move on.

Gamers of the '80s and '90s are having or have had their own children. How do they explain to their kids why they've chosen gaming as a hobby, help them feel the joys of the tactile clunk of cartridge into a slot and show them the protozoa and evolution of modern gaming without just resorting to emulators and, in a way, piracy?

Even though it's part of my career, so I handle corporate identity constantly, it's very difficult to suggest what to do in this situation, especially with companies within an industry so seemingly unwilling to acknowledge its own heritage. Any thoughts?
Justin

Should there be games libraries that receive a copy of every game upon publication and keep the hardware to play it on that can be rented out?

You're talking about games as if they're widely recognised as having some kind of cultural worth – and we know that's not the case. If we had the backing, we'd happily set up some kind of game preservation institution. The position of curator at such a place certainly wouldn't be short of applicants.

I am moved to write to you in response to Peter Vine's letter (E155), due to a profound difference of opinion. To argue that videogames are nothing more than just playthings – glorified, computerised versions of sports and board games – is to damn the interactive medium to an indefinite expectation of objective mediocrity and nothing more than rudimentary sophistication.

There is certainly a place in the world for the competitive and simulation varieties of game that Mr Vine identifies, but the potential of the medium goes far, far beyond that. The essence of art is the illustration of a theme through the telling of a story. Rather than being unsuited for storytelling, as Mr Vine seems to assume, the interactive medium offers untapped new possibilities for it. Due to the player's immersion in the telling of the story, the potential for emotional involvement is vastly greater than in other media, creating a sense of empathy with the in-game protagonist that simply cannot be rivalled by any other format of storytelling. Yes, it's true that games are different from films – but they are different in that the stories they tell feature you, the player, as a protagonist, rather than someone else whose activities you can merely passively observe. The remarkable aspect is that, even where a player character is well defined, the empathy inherent in player control of their actions genuinely serves to put you in their shoes, telling a story in a completely new way. In short, videogame stories happen to you rather than to other people – a profound and intriguing difference.

I nearly cried at the end of *Skies Of Arcadia*, when Vyse puts his arm around Fina on the night before the final, climactic battle. That is, for me, as sophisticated and mature a part of a story as I have ever seen in a videogame, and it means that I rank the game among the best that I have ever played.

Continued

F

Topic: My Invention

I've thought of a new idea. First there was the rumble pack from Nintendo, but I've thought of a new idea for the next controller: The Shocker. Instead of a rumble feature, when the player gets hit in a game, it gives the player a small electric shock. The harder the hits your character takes, the stronger the shock. It would make people play games much better. It would probably have to have a little warning sticker on it. But what do you think?
Matthew

A little too unpleasant, I'd imagine. Maybe fun for a while before you start to twitch every time someone mentions 'videogame'. What would happen when your character dies? "So it's true! Videogames CAN kill you!" Jack Thompson would have a field day...
SLEdge

Amazingly enough this has actually been done. Not officially, but there was a site that showed you how to mod an Xbox controller so that it would give you a shock when it rumbled. Just why you'd want this, I have no idea.
Wraith

There was also the Painstation. If I remember correctly it was an old *Pong* tabletop cabinet with metal handles added. You played with one hand and held the handle with the other; every time you missed the ball, you'd get a shock. The first player to let go of the handle was the loser – something like that. I always wanted one.
fish

It sounds like that electric shock aversion therapy, used to get people to stop doing things by associating them with pain. It would probably end up curing us of our game addiction.
JB

I want a controller that punches me in the face. Boxing games will be that much more realistic.
Kefka

Anyone know if the *Resident Evil* chainsaw peripheral will be compatible with the forthcoming Crazy Frog game?
g.man

And yet, were I to approach the story from an objective perspective, I would find it hackneyed, badly written, clichéd, lacking in dramatic tension, and superficial to the point of stupidity. There is little emotional depth in the story itself.

The reason for this general lack of depth lies in both attitudes and tools. For as long as both punters and publishers share Mr Vine's conviction that videogames offer nothing more than what they have already achieved, there will be no real dramatic advances towards the potential of the medium. And for as long as the creation of a videogame requires a level of technical skill that prohibits the vast majority of human beings ever being able to contemplate making one, the medium will not be a serious outlet for creative energy. The turning point will come, if it ever does, when the videogame industry attracts and retains creative forces in directors and scriptwriters



Topic: Trigger Happy
Right, first of all a call to Steven Poole to please write a sequel to Trigger Happy. Failing that can we get an online database of his articles and the rest of the regular Edge contributors past and present, pretty please? Is there one already somewhere else?
womblingfree

Thanks for the interest. I really should get around to updating the Edge column archive, but there was a hiatus while I wrote a new book (check out www.unspeak.net). Meanwhile, a Trigger Happy sequel in the future? Never say never...
steven_poole

who are able to both appreciate the potential of the medium and realise their visions. Alas, if Mr Vine gets his way, we will be stuck with the current mediocrity which prevents both society as a whole and the majority of intelligent people as individuals from taking interactive entertainment seriously as an artistic medium.

Many thanks to **Edge** for being one of the few publications to advance the cause of what gaming can be rather than simply wallow in the rut of what they currently do achieve.
Nat Kent

I find reading **Edge** more and more embarrassing in public. I used to be so proud to display my smart sophisticated copy but now it seems saturated with tits and arse. Now although I recognise that this is reflective of the industry, I can't remember the last time I saw someone turn the page when reading on a bus and have a panicked shuffle to hide a page full of cock.

I've been reading **Edge** since issue one and it appears that I'm getting older while **Edge** is having an identity crisis. I started reading **Edge** because it stood out as a publication that took itself and the industry seriously. Ultimately the comment and insight on the magazine's subject matter will keep me reading but I may have to keep it in private.
Julius Naim

'A page full of cock'? You're not talking about one of our columnists, are you? Or have you picked up a copy of the wrong **Edge** magazine? (Google it.)

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW









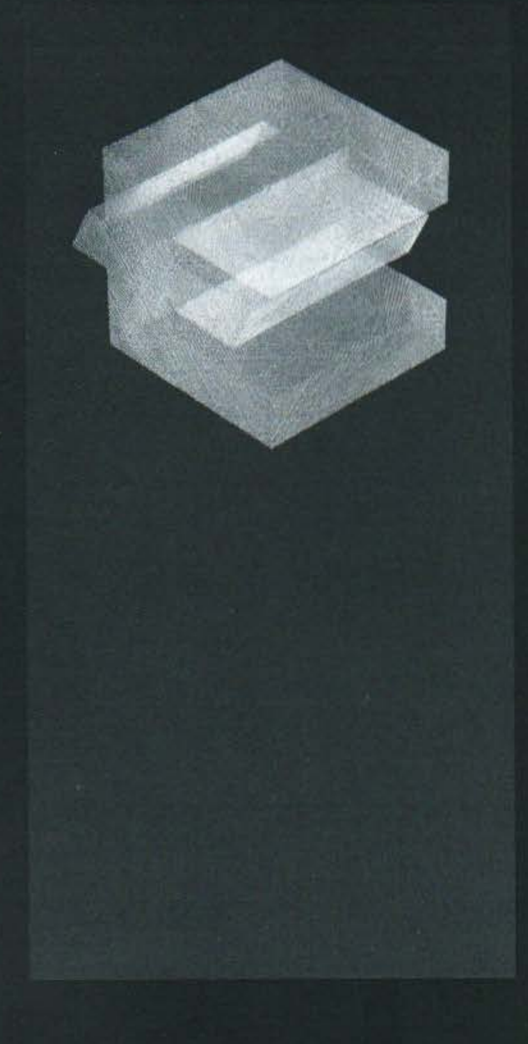








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